

# 手 本 小 説 の 旅 館 ひつぎ の の

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榎一郎

Ichirou Sakaki



ファンタジア文庫



# Hitsugi no Chaika

vol.1

by Sakaki Ichirou

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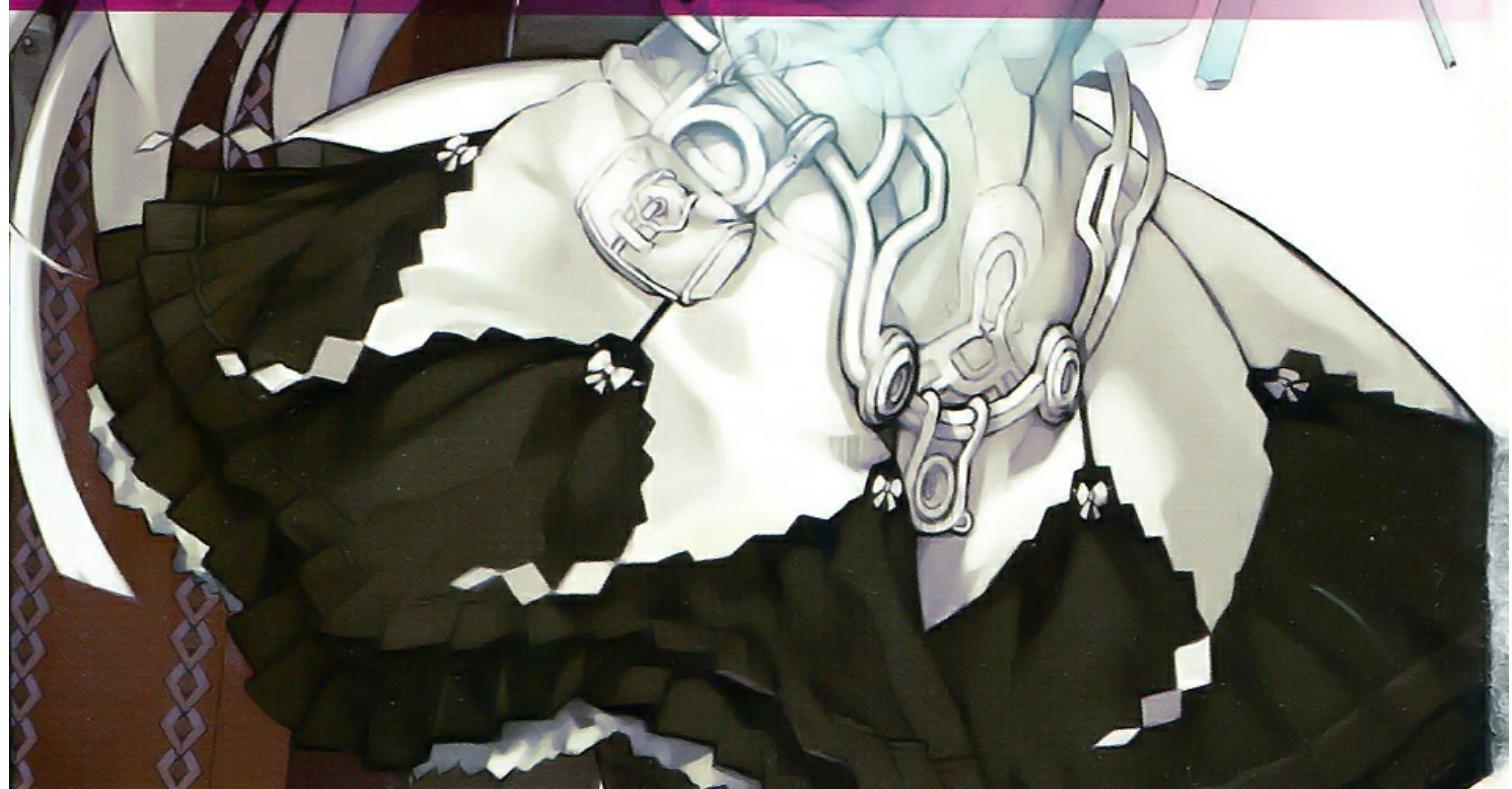
棺姫のチャイカ I

目覚めればそこに義妹アカリの美しい顔があった。  
「兄様。おはよう」彼女は四つん這いで、俺——トール・アキュラの上に跨っていた。枕には、アカリ愛用の鉄槌が深々と突き刺さっている。戦乱の後フェルビスト大陸を兄妹で放浪し、その日暮らしをしてきたが、とうとう食い詰めてアカリは俺に業を煮やしたのだ。  
「働いたら負けだ」とひとりごちながら、食料を探しに山林へ入ると、何かが草むらに潜んで動いている。凶暴な獣かと構えたが、現れたのは小柄な少女だった。「お……襲う？」黒い衣装をまとい、槌を背負った不思議な少女は、大きな紫の瞳で俺を見つめる。彼女——チャイカと俺はこうして出会い、世界は再び動き出した。

ファンタジア文庫



# 棺姫のチャイナ I









## AKARI ACURA'S CHARACTER OBSERVATION REPORT



### [Akari Acura]

I'm Akari Acura. You might recall the name "Acura" from somewhere else, but don't ask. I currently reside in the continent of Verbist with only my cherished and respected Nii-sama. With no place we can call home, we've become vagabonds. Incidentally, even though I say "Nii-sama", calling someone that in our clan doesn't mean we're actually related by blood, which means it's completely possible for stuff like "this" or "that" to happen. You should be grateful.

### [Tohru Acura]

This is the Nii-sama that I so adore, Tohru. Lots of people with holes for eyes say that he's gloomy and has no ambition, but just where do they see that in him? Sure, he's a bit unmotivated at times, and yeah, he can be a little unreliable, and it's true that he's spent the whole year secluded in the house doing nothing, but he can do things if he tries, and that's final.



### [Chaika Trabant]

This girl is called Chaika Trabant. She's a little girl Nii-sama found in the mountains. From traveling by herself to bearing a coffin on her back to being chased by someone, she seems to have a lot on her plate, but none of that really matters to me. The main problem is that a young girl like her appears to be getting awfully close with Nii-sama. Furthermore, even though she gives off the impression of being airheaded at times, she seems to motivate him enough for him to want to protect her. It's alarming. Seriously alarming.



# Prologue: The End of “War-Torn”

On that day, that life she took for granted—came to a sudden end.

Or perhaps it hadn’t been sudden. Perhaps the writing had been on the wall since long ago. But the girl was much too young to know of the circumstances surrounding the kingdom or the neighboring nations...it had all occurred in places she was not familiar with. The only thing she could do was stand there in a daze at this much-too-sudden turn of events.

Somewhere, someone was yelling.

Somewhere, someone was crying.

Somewhere, someone was shouting.

Countless voices layered over each other, creating a cacophonous tune. There were screams, bellows, shrieks—the innumerable voices harmonized with the roar of the flames and the howling of the wind, forming a symphony of sorts. It was impossible to tell any one voice apart from the noise—in other words, it was the death knell of a single nation.

“—Your Highness!”

Outside the window, she could see something strange.

In the sky, far away, an enormous *thing* was floating.

She didn’t know how far away it was, but she understood in an instant that its sheer size was incredible. From the size of the dragon knights flying alongside it, she surmised it was probably about as large as a castle—no, perhaps even a mountain.

But it was floating in the air.

There were no supports to hold it up. There was nothing keeping it afloat. It was just like a cloud.

It was true that magic could make the impossible into a reality—but even so, this was much too extraordinary.

At first glance she thought it looked like some kind of upright cylinder, but upon closer inspection it looked more like a statue, like the figure of a maiden with both arms to her chest, mimicking the act of prayer.

A gigantic statue flying in the sky.

It was—

“—Your Highness!”

It would take her a bit of time to realize it, but it was the enemy coming to attack.

*I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared out of my mind.*

Thinking she should escape, she shifted her gaze downward.

But it was too late. The scenery of Hell was already spread out before her.

An enemy soldier. Another enemy soldier. There were enemy soldiers—everywhere.

The scenery below her was already overrun with enemy soldiers.

An incalculable number of soldiers were barreling their way through.

She watched the soldiers overwhelm, crush, kill, and exhaust their enemies. She saw them brandish their weapons, ready their shields, and eliminate their opponents. She saw it all.

“Your Highness, where are you!?”

She was too young to understand strategy or tactics or the like, but even so, she was convinced.

They wouldn't win like this. There was no chance of victory at this rate.

“Your Highness...!”

The door finally gave way, and an elderly female attendant tumbled into the room.

“Ah, Highness...to think you were here!” she shouted, her face contorted into the very image of panic. She looked absolutely wretched; her hair and clothes had become a mess. Her usual insistence that “ladies of the court must be prim and proper, first and foremost” now seemed like some sort of farce. She had more than likely tripped and fallen somewhere. Blood trickled down from a cut on her cheek.

“Please, won’t you come with me...and quickly!”

“...”

They continued on through the castle, the attendant pulling the girl along all the while.

The castle scenery that the girl should have been used to seeing by now—was now unrecognizable.

Everything was red.

It was all the color of blazing flames, the color of spattered blood—that overly familiar scenery had been crushed and dyed in the color of death and destruction. The once proudly-hoisted flags and the decorative paintings were up in flames, scattering embers everywhere. If the carpet hadn’t been soaked in massive amounts of blood, it likely would have gone up as well.

Numerous corpses littered the ground, both enemy and ally.

Counting them would have been truly impossible, as some of the pieces no longer resembled anything human.

Many of the bodies had been cut down with swords, but there were also corpses that had been burnt black, and others whose whole bodies had been melted down like wax. How on earth these people had died, she couldn’t even imagine.

There were corpses of men, women, children, and even the elderly.

The deaths of each and every one of them were laying there in plain view.

Walking through all that—

“It’s all right, Your Highness, it’ll be all right,” muttered the attendant as she weaved through the dead bodies, occasionally stepping over corpses as she continued onward. She sounded as though she was trying to reassure herself rather than the girl.

Neither tried to distinguish the corpses as ally or enemy. They couldn’t; there was no time for that.

“If we could just reach His Majesty’s quarters, where His Majesty is—”

It had taken them several times longer to get there than usual, but the girl and the attendant finally reached the castle’s inner sanctum.

It was a miracle that they hadn’t run into any enemy soldiers along the way.

However—

“Your Majesty! I’ve brought the princess!” the lady-in-waiting shouted as she burst into the audience chamber.

“....!?”

She froze in place, stricken with terror.

Normally, an overabundance of retainers would be in the reception hall—a hundred or so. This enormous room, which could be called a symbol of the emperor’s authority, had been completely abandoned. The sunset’s dim light shone through the windows, dyeing the entire room a languid color.

And then—in the center.

The throne upon which the emperor’s figure should have been sitting—was empty.

Instead—

“Y...Your Majesty...!?”

The attendant couldn’t help but gasp. A short distance away from the throne, a man had collapsed face-down on the floor. She couldn’t see his face, but with that build, and with that lavish gold and silver thread woven through his clothing, anyone could tell at a glance who he was.

It was also evident—that this incredible man had already breathed his last.

A pool of blood gradually expanding across the marble floor told the tale.

“T-this is...”

The attendant stared out over the emperor’s body with bloodshot eyes.

Eight people were standing there in a semicircle.

All of them were armed: knights with their swords, and wizards with their Gundo. A demi-human with beast-like ears and a tail also seemed to be in the mix. Each one of them wore a different uniform, and their personal features and skin color varied from person to person. Most likely, this melting pot of troops had been gathered from a variety of countries.

“Your Majesty, Your Majesty, Your Majesty!?” the attendant continued to scream as she rushed over to the corpse and fell to her knees.

But in that next instant—

“Your Majesty, Your—”

*Thud.*

A dull sound resounded through the reception hall.

One of the eight had moved forward. Using the long sword in his right hand, he had sliced off the attendant’s head—it seemed. She couldn’t definitively say it happened that way because she barely saw the sword move at all. She only saw that the swordsman was now adopting a different stance and that the attendant’s head had flown off her body and whirled into the air, a surprised expression perpetually frozen on her face, so she’d simply come to that conclusion.

And then—

“Are you...the demon’s daughter?”

One of the eight spoke.

The eight collectively focused their lines of sight on her.

Though futile it had been, the attendant certainly had said *I’ve brought the princess.*

Therefore, it was already too late to deny it or play dumb. There was no way they'd show any mercy. No—even if the attendant hadn't said anything, it would likely lead to the same conclusion.

In this castle infested with death, there was no one around to bat an eye if the body count went up by one or two. As a matter of fact, if they let a blood relative of the Taboo Emperor go, they'd pay for their negligence and would all end up dead—that was a natural thought process.

“Then there’s no way around it.”

“Even if she’s just a child, there can be no exceptions.”

“We must sever the root of our anxiety.”

The eight calmly began to approach.

“For peace.”

“For justice.”

“For the world.”

“Don’t you dare ask for mercy.”

The swordsman that had decapitated the lady could be seen raising his longsword.

“Now then—curse and scream to your heart’s content, for it will be your last action upon this earth.”

Then—

...

The year was 1604.

On the continent of Verbiest, the era of vicious conflict spanning three hundred years had come to an end with the collapse of the Gaz Empire in the north.

Its military force had consisted of official knights and soldiers, as well as wizards, saboteurs and mercenaries. There had been about 620,000 troops in total, along with a number of magic-based weapons including three sky fortresses, an army of Feyra, and a group of special forces known as “dragon knights.” Even so, every single one was overcome, and the Gaz Empire, “the

root of all evil", was completely and utterly wiped from the face of the earth.

After the destruction of the Empire, six nations had come together to form an alliance and had mutually agreed to a peace treaty from then on, which was a formal declaration that the war had ended. The Gaz Empire was then divided up, as were the staggering amount of resources and wealth the Taboo Emperor had amassed. These great riches of the Gaz Empire were distributed among the six nations and were used for war reparations. The magic technology that the empire had prided itself on met with the same fate.

This was the long-awaited era of peace that everyone had yearned for.

However—

# **Chapter 1: The Girl Who Carries a Coffin**



## Part 1

When he woke up, his sister's face was right in front of him.

She was close enough that he could feel her light breaths.

“...”

“...”

For a short while, neither of them said a word.

He heard the chirping of birds from far off.

White sunlight shone through the window, leaving a trace of warmth hanging in the air. It was a sure sign even to those holed up in their rooms that the long winter's end was near. The plants would start to bud, and the animals would leave their dens. It was that time of year when life began to stir once more in anticipation for the prosperous days ahead.

But...

“Good morning, dear brother,” his younger sister Akari said in a hushed voice.

Both siblings were on the bed.

Akari was on top of him. She was hunched over on all fours like a carnivorous animal in anticipation for its meal, ready to consume its helpless prey. She was taller than most girls her age to begin with, so naturally, stretching over anyone with her back arched like that would cause them to immediately submit.

“...”

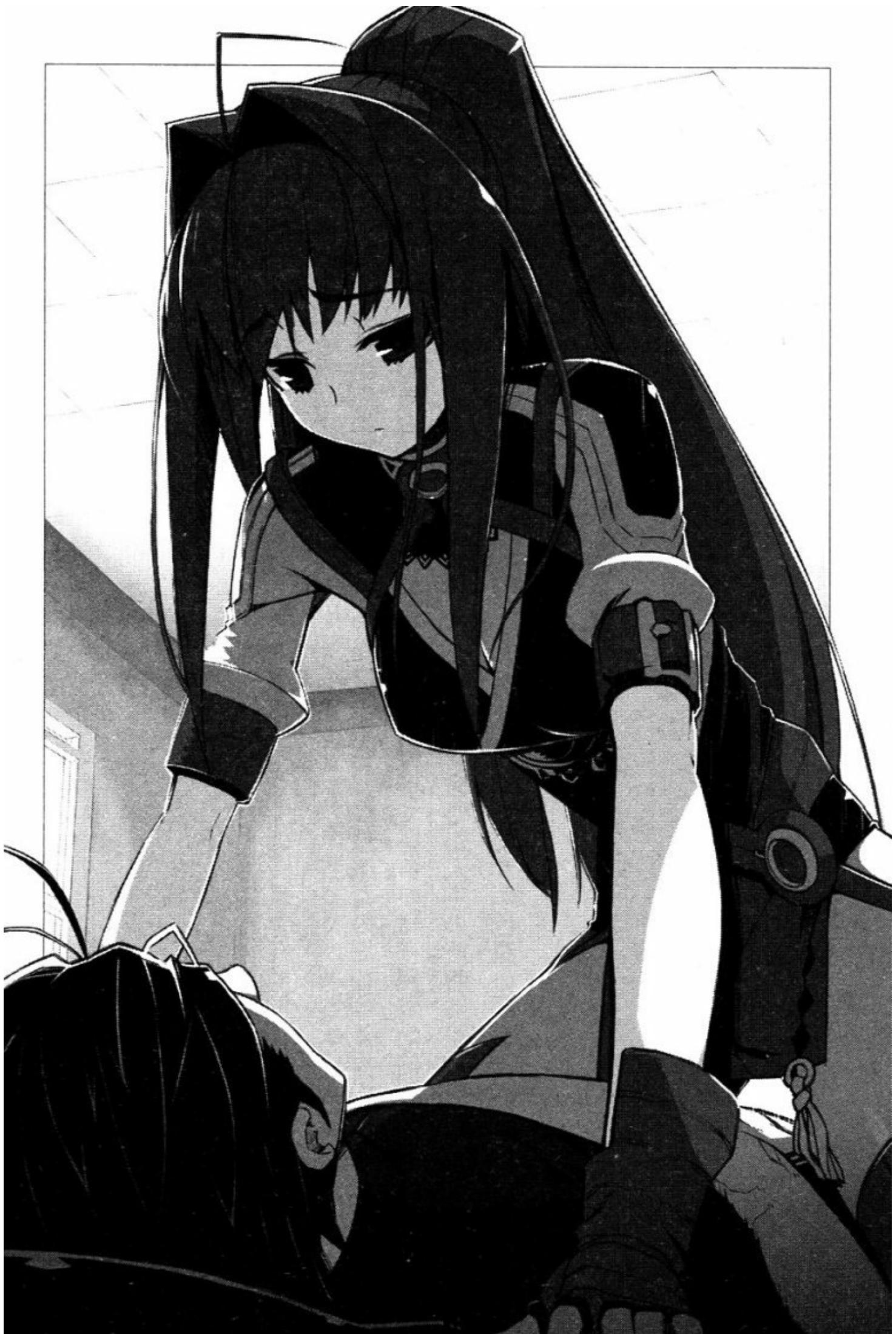
His sister though she might be, Tohru had to admit that she was beautiful.

She was only seventeen, yet she was already at that ripe age where it was more appropriate to call her “beautiful” rather than “cute”. Her authoritative facial features stood out clearly and her long black hair gently cascaded down, perfectly arranged like a genuine work of art. Naturally she was well-liked by members of the opposite sex, but her looks were such that even the those of the same sex couldn't help but take notice.

However, her severely limited range of expression was a black mark against her. Tohru felt like she'd really been handed the short end of the stick here—though it didn't seem to bother her in the least.

In comparison—

“...”



The face of a boy with narrowed black eyes and a fed-up expression was reflected in Akari's pupils.

His hair and eyes were black, same as Akari's.

It wasn't wrong to call the arrangement of his facial features "handsome."

However, that expression had an overall looseness to it.

Like he was bored, or perhaps listless.

His face distinctly lacked the ambition and vitality typical of a teenage boy; a dried-out, exhausted expression was plastered there in its place. Though there were no wrinkles or dark spots anywhere on it, it was a face that called to mind an old man approaching the final stage of his life. Even for someone having just woken up, the impression was overly pronounced.

*This is a pretty gloomy face even for me, isn't it?* he thought.

But a mere thought wasn't enough to get him to change his attitude now.

"Dear brother..."

The brother lying on the bed, and the sister straddling him from above.

To say this was a completely unexpected event—would be a lie.

He had figured it would end up like this eventually.

That's because he had noticed that she'd been looking at him strangely for a while now.

But...

"I-can't hold back anymore."

Akari gazed into Tohru's eyes.

"When I think about my beloved brother, I just...I just..."

"You just...what? Spit it out already," Tohru asked her, looking bored.

"...I had no intention of ever acting this boldly, you know..." said Akari, casting her eyes downward ever so slightly.

"Really now?"

“But it’s because you’re just so terrible.”

“I’m terrible?”

“That’s right. My dear brother is—a terrible person,” she said with a tiny shake of her head. “To act this way...even though you already know how I feel.”

“Uh, well...”

He frowned, looking up at his sister’s face. Almost as if it could stand it no longer, a tuft of her black hair fell down, tickling his cheek.

“Quite frankly, I wasn’t aware it had become that big of an issue,” he said.

Her range of expressions was poor and she was often unpredictable to boot, so even Tohru had difficulty reading his sister’s thoughts. Normally she had a strong sense of self-control—but all this time she’d been holding it in and holding it in until the day where she let it all go in a sudden explosion, putting anyone in her immediate vicinity in danger.

The older brother—Tohru Acura.

The younger sister—Akari Acura.

Those were the names of these two—the Acura siblings.

Yet the instances in which they actually had to give their first names were few and far between, and none of their neighbors even knew their surnames. There were many countries that had commoners without surnames, so it wasn’t so rare. The end of the long era of war had brought with it many refugees, and it wasn’t rare to find immigrants from various countries cohabitating in the same town or village, either.

Well, that aside...

“Akari. Mind if I ask you a question?” said Tohru, still looking bored.

“Whatever could that be? If it’s a question from you, my dear brother, I will answer anything.”

Her words belied her eyes, which were as frigid as the frozen surface of a lake in winter.

Though that was the norm for her.

“What the hell is *this*?”

Tohru pointed to what was right next to his head.

It was—an iron hammer.

The sharp point of which was embedded deep in his pillow.

“What do you mean, dear brother?” Akari tilted her head with a curious expression. “You’re much too young to be losing your memory already. It’s been my cherished weapon for at least ten years now.”

“Of course I know that,” Tohru groaned.

For an iron hammer, however, it was not really that large. Its power came from the firm, weighty material itself, as well as the ability of its user. It was designed to be swung easily—in other words, it could sufficiently be used as a lethal weapon even indoors.

“What I’m asking is *why* this thing is on my pillow.”

“Well, that’s obviously because I swung it down onto your pillow.”

“I get that as well.”

“Then what else is there to not get?”

“First off, what I don’t get is how you don’t get what I don’t get,” Tohru replied while giving his younger sister a sharp look. “This ‘cherished weapon’ that you’ve been carrying around for ten-some years”—he indicated the hammer by tapping it with his index finger—“*why* did you swing it down on my pillow? *That’s* what I don’t get.”

“Oh, dear brother of mine...” She shook her head sadly.

However, her expression remained stoic.

“I wasn’t aiming for your pillow.”

“Oh?”

“I was aiming for your head.”

“That’s even worse, you idiot.” Tohru intended to yell that insult, but since he had just woken up he couldn’t muster the energy to raise his voice any further.

Instead, it ended up coming out like an unintelligible mutter. “What were you trying to do, kill me?”

“Ridiculous. I would never harbor any murderous intent towards my cherished and respected brother,” Akari said grandly, still in the stance of having just swung her hammer down.

It could be said that her behavior was even somewhat refreshing in its overtess.

“I just thought I might rouse my chronically-sleepyhead brother from his slumber.”

“You almost put me in a state of *eternal* slumber...”

Just by a hair...if Tohru hadn’t turned over towards the wall in his sleep right before the hammer came crashing down, it definitely would have been his forehead that was crushed, not the pillow. Incidentally, it wasn’t visible right now because it was buried in the pillow, but due to Akari’s hammer having a sharp point on one side, the hammer would have gone straight through the cranium and into his brain.

“Huh, perhaps so,” Akari nodded her head, remaining cool and composed with a look that seemed to say, *And what’s wrong with that?*

They stayed silent and still for another short while.

The chirping birds outside were even more audible in the silence.

“...Dear brother.” Akari began in her usual indifferent tone that sounded as though she was tired of even looking at him. “What are your plans for today?”

“Sleeping,” Tohru said, as if it was bothersome to even respond. “Lying around all day, doing nothing.”

“I see. And what else?”

“And...when I’m hungry, I guess I’ll eat something.”

“I see. How sensible. And?”

“That’s pretty much it.”

Tohru rolled back over on his side, as if saying anything further would be a

nuisance.

Akari waited for a bit in silence, perhaps expecting the conversation to continue, but—

“...Dear brother.”

Then she spoke, looking down on her brother’s profile.

The hammer, by the way, had sunk even further into Tohru’s pillow.

“If you were to do some work for me today, I would probably be so delighted I’d spurt blood from my nose.”

“Then you can just go ahead and die from excessive blood loss.”

“That’s a cruel thing to say, my dear brother. Even after all the love and respect I give you...”

“That’s why you’re going to clobber me with that hammer, right?”

“This is the Hammer of Love,” Akari replied calmly.

With nimble movements she grabbed her hammer like it was a feather and, got down from the bed, swinging the hammer over her shoulder just as fluidly. Looking at her lean, toned arms you could see how it was possible, but even for one used to this combination of young girl and deadly blunt weapon, it was still a surreal sight.

“Beloved brother of mine, I’ve been thinking this was strange for a while now, but...”

“What now?”

“Why aren’t you out working?”

Now that she wasn’t threatening him with his life, the questioning was a lot more bearable.

After swallowing down an instinctive sigh, Tohru replied.

“Those who work, lose,” he said, his back still to his sister.

“...”

The sense that she was tilting her head in puzzlement drifted over him.

“Who is that directed towards?”

“Dunno.”

“...”

A heavy silence fell over the two.

*Staaaaare*—sensing Akari’s piercing gaze from behind, Tohru spoke further.

“Just let it go already.”

“...”

For a bit, he had the sense that she was considering it. But then—

*...Bloodlust!?*

He could read the murderous intent that was practically written in the air.

“—!!”

The hammer, swung with ridiculous force, came for him in an arc. By shrinking back, he managed to evade in the nick of time, the hammer coming a hair’s breadth away from skull. If he had been late in dodging by even one instant, the hair on his head would have been sliced off along with the skin, giving him a magnificently bald head. That is, if you could call having your bare skull exposed “bald”.

“You...!”

As one would expect after something like that, Tohru was now wide awake, and he spun around to face his sister.

“Oh, dear brother...” While pressing her left hand to her forehead in pity—though still expressionless, mind you—her right hand was twirling her hammer around and around with unrelenting force. “If that’s the way it has to be, then...”

“No, wait. Wait. For now, just put that damn thing away!” he said, holding up both hands in front of him as if to keep even the slightest bit of distance between them—at this range if she extended her arm even a little bit the hammer would easily score a direct hit on his head. She was within “the sweet

spot," so to speak. If that hammer struck him with maximum centrifugal force, both Tohru and the bed would likely be split in two.

"..."

As for Akari—she was now twirling the hammer around with such force that it began to emit a whistling noise. She clearly had no intention of yielding whatsoever. Usually he could talk his way out of the situation by changing the subject or distracting her, but today Akari was determined to hold her ground to the bitter end. As one would expect, she had reached the limit of her patience.

"Dearest brother..."

"...Yeah?"

"I've had it up to here with you, you know. Not making any effort to work, not even leaving the house, just lazing around and lazing around and lazing around and lazing around just lazing around and lazing around and lazing around and lazing around in the house all day. If you keep on like this, I..."

"That's a lot of lazing around, even for me."

"I've had enough...at this rate..."

"At this rate...what?"

"At this rate I might as well just stuff you and sell you off..."

"Don't do that! I mean, it's not like I would sell anyway!"

"You fool." Though Akari didn't slow the twirling of her hammer, she shook her head as if his response was asinine. "I would be willing to go up to my eyeballs in debt to buy you."

"My stuffed corpse, you mean?"

"In the long run wouldn't a stuffed brother be more economically viable, since I wouldn't have to feed it?"

"..."

"..."

Neither of them said a word.

The only thing that could be heard was the sound of the hammer still whirling around with the same insane force.

“Yes, come to think of it, stuffing you would be—”

“Okay, I get it, I understand!” Tohru said in a panic.

At this rate he really was going to be smashed to a pulp by his younger sister. Of course, he wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of becoming a taxidermy project either. Even now he had no intention to lift a finger to help, but right now it was best for his well-being to prioritize getting out of this situation over another snooze.

“A-anyway, let’s—oh yeah, breakfast! save this for after breakfast.”

“We don’t have any more money for that,” Akari said, dropping her hammer at last. “I believe I already told you that last night’s dinner was the finale, did I not?”

“Oh...did you now?”

“Surely someone as sensible as my beloved brother wouldn’t have forgotten such a thing.”

“...”

Tohru looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

Now that she mentioned it, he may have heard her saying something like that last night...or maybe not? He usually let Akari’s scolding go in one ear and out the other, so he didn’t remember too well.

“Now, dear brother—”

She readied her hammer once more.

“All right, all right, I get it! For now, I’ll do something about breakfast!!”

In accordance with Tohru’s screams and shouts, the hammer that had traced a violent arc in the air stopped on a dime, just before pulverizing his face.

## Part 2

As he walked along the road, he felt countless sharp gazes pierce into him like needles.

For someone like Tohru who had a keen sensitivity to this sort of thing, there was no greater displeasure. However, on top of being a newcomer to this town, he was also aware he was a conspicuous anomaly. He was in no position to complain.

“...”

A sigh escaped him.

Shabby houses to the left. Shabby houses to the right. Clusters of shabby houses as far as the eye could see. Were it not for the people visible inside, these old filthy buildings lined up one after another could have easily been mistaken for abandoned. Fissures had formed in the walls and the paint had peeled away—and that was in the *best* case. Other buildings were clearly leaning to one side, and some had cloths drenched in oil stretched across their collapsed ceilings to protect against strong wind and rain. It was dangerous no matter how you looked at it...though you couldn't say they weren't being resourceful.

However, the atmosphere here was by no means degenerate.

It definitely wasn't elegant or refined, either, but—even if it did smell like dirt and mud, the atmosphere along the road was teeming with energy, what one could call “life itself.”

The black markets would often set up shop in this particular area.

For that reason, the foot traffic here was much heavier than normal. In anticipation of that, men and women alike could be seen at stalls you couldn't really call “shops”, peddling odds and ends that anyone would hesitate to call “merchandise” atop wooden boxes, including the day's garbage, edible wild plants, and animal flesh of unknown origin. Children in shabby clothing were running around the adults, shouting and laughing. To help dispose of extra food

scraps, each residence owned pet pigs; they were also running along the road, oinking and making noise as they went.

Nations had collapsed.

Towns had been burned down.

Friends and family alike had met their end.

Yet even so....if the people here wanted to live, they had to move on. As long as they didn't fall into the depths of despair and end up taking their own life, they continued to survive, even if they had to sip from the mud and chew on tree roots to do so. This was a place for the strong-willed with nowhere else to call home. Disorderly and confusing, perhaps, but no one could dispute that these people were brimming with life.

For this reason, someone like Tohru definitely stood out.

He always looked gloomy, had no ambition, and dragged along an air of melancholy as he walked.

“...”

Tohru was sauntering through the refugee district on the south side of the regional town Del Solant.

Fortunately—well, whether or not you could actually call it a good thing was up for debate, but thanks to the war lasting so long, there were plenty of abandoned buildings and the like for people to move into. People who'd lost their homes to war had drifted here from other regions and nations, and it was common to see them refurbish the buildings here to a livable state.

Though veteran residents of this town weren't exactly thrilled with the presence of drifters, they didn't actively ostracize them either. With the long-overdue rise of something resembling peace, there came a sense of mutual aid among the commoners that went beyond social status.

This was a period of post-war disorder.

Most of the nations were struggling to reform their infrastructures, and lords, nobles and knights alike had their hands full. The lives of common folk were outside their area of concern. Since they didn't have the support of the upper

class, the lower classes had to stick together in order to preserve their own futures, and that was evident regardless of the town or street.

Tohru and Akari's shabby home was also on a block within this refugee district.

After they'd been chased off from the clan they'd been born and raised in, they wandered around for about half a year before drifting into the refugee district that had naturally formed in a corner of Del Solant.

The two of them lived by themselves.

They had no idea where their parents or relatives were.

Not long after the end of the war, the whole clan had scattered—they didn't even know whether they were dead or alive. Well, when their family had left the clan village they'd taken most of their possessions with them, and they were a brash bunch in all sorts of ways. They were likely still alive and kicking somewhere, just like these refugees.

"Oh, if it isn't Tohru."

An old lady sitting on a roadside bench and weaving a wicker basket noticed Tohru and called out to him. He'd forgotten her name—but he recognized her face. He should have come across it quite a few times since coming to live here. She was that lady that liked to meddle in other people's affairs. From mediating matrimonial disputes to helping out with simple jobs, she seemed to use her wealth of life experience to micromanage the lives of her neighbors.

"Fancy seeing you outside."

"I suppose," Tohru responded noncommittally.

On the whole, he could guess what her next remark would be.

"Don't leave all the work to young Akari, Tohru. You need to do your share too."

"..."

*That's none of your business*—Tohru gulped down those words before they emerged from his throat.

Though he knew it looked bad to not do any work, it was also true that Akari

was currently putting food on the table for him. However, Akari was strangely ignorant in the ways of the world, so her earnings were meager at best. It also didn't help that they were mixed in with a bunch of refugees, making it difficult to find a decent job. That was the reason procuring this morning's meal had become such an issue...

"Maybe one day, if I feel like it."

With a light wave of his hand, he passed the old lady by.

Tohru was unemployed.

What's more, he wasn't currently in between jobs, nor was he training in preparation to find himself more work. He was registered at the town guild as a mere formality...but he hadn't once accepted any jobs.

Summing it all up, he was a penniless bum that made no conscious effort to better himself—the textbook example of a worthless human being.

And so, his sister threatening to clobber him with her hammer first thing in the morning was a natural outcome—well, maybe going that far was a bit much, but there were probably few out there who would blame her. However, for Tohru, whose life was now on the chopping block, it was intolerable.

"Working'...huh," he muttered cynically, more to himself rather than intending for anyone to hear. Making sure his trusty hatchet was still on his waist, he set out for the south gate of Del Solant at the edge of the refugee district.

## Part 3

He put down his quill pen and breathed a heavy sigh.

Not even thirty minutes into today's work, and Konrad Steinmetz was already worn out. He still hadn't shaken off the fatigue that had built up until yesterday, so it was only natural.

At the entrance to his office there was a full-length mirror on the wall, next to the hat rack. Gazing into it, he saw his exhausted reflection staring back at him: a bitter middle-aged man with reproachful eyes. He had the feeling that the slight bit of remaining hair above his ear had recently also begun to recede; it probably wouldn't be too long before he was completely bald.

“—By the way.”

His female aide Karen Bombardier called out to him from the other side of the mountain of official documents on his desk; seeing him put down his pen, she had apparently determined he was now taking a break. As she pushed up the glasses on her no-nonsense face with one finger, she spoke in a deadpan tone of voice.

“About the aforementioned matter...”

“And which one might that be?”

Konrad was fifty-eight years old. He was still able to take pride in his strong memory, but expecting him to remember all of the “aforementioned matters” that were added to his workload every day by the dozen was asking too much.

Konrad and Karen belonged to the post-war reconstruction organization known as “Kleeman,” and the number of issues they had to deal with one after the other made the work incredibly stressful.

For better or for worse, the end of the war had brought about change in the continent of Verbist. There were no bones about the differences in values of an era where war had been commonplace and an era where peace reigned. Politics, economics and the like had changed completely.

In particular, the statesmen and nobility who had championed the war under

the banner of “just cause” now had to take a long, hard look about how to run their territory from here on out.

*We're in a war right now. Now's not the time to be frivolous.*

*If we lose the war, we'll have everything taken from under our noses. Are you all really okay with that?*

They were no longer able to use such rhetoric to steer the dissatisfaction of the masses towards an enemy.

The problems were piling up in every nation.

Everyone had believed that all their anxiety and unhappiness would end with the war's end, and it was this unshakable faith that had carried them all through the harsh era. However, the period of conflict had lasted several centuries. When it was finally time for the war to end, no one could associate the concept of “peace” with anything concrete.

The nobles had no choice but to change their way of thinking.

Of course, there were nobles that adapted to the new era with no problem, but many of the ones set in their ways of using coercive tactics to rule the people received a rude awakening.

Though the masses' expectations had swelled in anticipation of this “peace” that they knew nothing about, when it finally came they were just as bad off as they had been. They became discontent.

The result of all this was—rebellions and riots were cropping up all over the continent of Verbist.

Knights were pointing their swords in the direction of the very people they sought to protect.

Naturally, even the nobility knew it couldn't continue like this.

However, not all the nations and towns were having issues.

Whether by happenstance or by pure ability to rule, there were some areas that had, in the most literal sense, been able to find peace without much trouble at all. Some nations and towns even had their economies revitalized, propelling them to even greater wealth.

The nobility, deciding to attempt to imitate the successes of those few, began to exchange information with each other. The large number of wizards that had been relieved from their duties after the war's end were re-employed, and the nobility used the wizards' communication magic to conduct repeat meetings.

These past several hundred years, research into political science and economics had been at a standstill, but now there was a mad rush of information.

Of course, with all this information at once it quickly became complicated and confusing.

In order to keep the disorder to a minimum—in order to organize and distribute the information accordingly—all the nations got together and instated an ultra-nationalist organization.

That was the Organization for the Advancement of Post-War Reconstruction, Kleeman.

Its primary objective was to research and supply methods for the ideal management of each nation.

In some respects, the entire future of Verbist rested in their hands of this organization.

But there were a mountain of employment prerequisites, and the number of people involved was pitifully low.

“The matter of the “Demon King’s” legacy.”

“....Ah.”

Konrad grimaced.

Among the bevy of various issues that he had to deal with, this one was by far the most troublesome.

“Gillette Corps is scheduled to arrive in Del Solant tomorrow. I received a transmission from them yesterday.”

“Del Solant...”

Konrad grabbed a directory of the nobility in Verbist from a side bookshelf

and began flipping the pages.

The authoritative figure of Del Solant was—

“I see. One of the men who subjugated the Demon King.”

“He might not necessarily have one, though,” said Karen. “I sent a letter detailing our request for his cooperation in the meantime, but we have yet to hear anything back.”

“Well, that’s to be expected,” said Konrad, heaving a sigh. “He and everyone else are busy. Busy and exhausted. We’ll probably get a reply back saying that he ‘doesn’t have time to entertain this nonsense.’”

“What shall we do, then?”

“We’ll leave that up to the ones on-site,” said Konrad. “I’ve got things like riots, infectious diseases, currency crises, and ethnic conflicts on my plate. I don’t have time to be diddling around on an issue that ‘might’ become a problem when I have so many things in this pile that are *already* problems.”

As he said this, he indicated the huge pile of documents beside him.

“Understood. Do as you will.”

Karen, perhaps also tired of looking at the tall tower of documents, nodded—and didn’t press the issue any further.

But—

*As expected of the Demon King*, Konrad muttered in his heart. *Even after his death, his shadow still haunts us.*

Arthur Gaz—Emperor Gaz of the Gaz Empire.

The “Demon King.” The “Taboo Emperor.” The “Great Sage.” The “Mad General.” The “Genius Ruler”—with the death of this man that had so many monikers, the long, long war had come to an end. It was as if the man himself had been a symbol of the era of war.

But...

*Now then. I hope this is all just needless anxiety.*

With that thought, he took the quill pen in hand once more and resumed his paperwork.

## Part 4

“—This sucks.”

Walking with his unsheathed hatchet in hand, Tohru muttered to himself.

“Ah, damn it, this is such a pain. Thinking about it all now, this is gonna be some workout, isn’t it? Screw this. Did I not say ‘those who work, lose?’ God damn it, what a pain. I wonder if someone’s dropped money somewhere. That’d speed things up a bit.”

He spat out disgusting remarks worthy of a useless human being.

Of course, being penniless was no grounds for becoming a petty thief.

Before Tohru’s eyes was a panorama of a mountain forest ripe with vegetation.

Del Solant was one of the average fortified towns. It was surrounded by a mountain on three sides which made trade less convenient, but it also made the town easier to defend and by extension harder to invade. The reason the war dragged on so long was because of the ongoing conflict between the governing lords. As a result, many of the towns had undergone fortification, but now that the war was over most of these resilient fort-like features only made the town harder to get in and out of.

At any rate—just outside of Del Solant, there was an enormous mountain region.

The fresh vegetation and wild animals were plentiful here, but a hiking novice would probably find it a bit steep for their liking. For that reason, only professionals like hunters and lumberjacks typically ventured out to this place.

Tohru had figured this spot would be good for capturing mice or rabbits, or picking wild plants.

However—

“Damn that Akari.”

Some shrub leaves he had hacked off with his hatchet whirled up in the air—

and fluttered to the ground. He grabbed one leaf fluttering in front of his face and stuck it in the corner of his mouth, grumbling all the while.

“What’s she expecting out of me after all this time, anyway?”

It had already been a year since they had drifted to Del Solant.

After day after day of watching her older brother do absolutely nothing but laze around, you’d think Akari would have given up on him by now—but she was still finding various ways to light a fire under his rear.

She had also been the one to register Tohru’s name into the Del Solant guild.

She had registered herself as well, but a surplus of hired hands didn’t necessarily guarantee work. To make matters worse, there was the aforementioned fact that Akari was curiously naive when it came to society and never noticed that she was getting the crappy jobs pushed onto her. Her income was barely enough to scrape by.

If you thought about it, all fort towns were largely autonomous, not just Del Solant. There was no way any job considered “good” was going to trickle down to the refugees—all the more so if you were considered a newcomer.

“As for her, her looks are good enough; why doesn’t she just hook up with some decent guy? She’d never have to worry about food again.”

And she’d never have to concern herself with her useless brother again either.

Tohru felt like he’d be happier on his own anyway. When it got to the point that he couldn’t go any longer without a meal, he’d could just forage through the mountains like he was doing now. Of course, without any bread, cheese, butter, salt or pepper, eating plants for every meal would get old fast.

But, he’d deal with that when it came to it.

“In the first place, even though we’re ‘siblings’, originally we were strangers... honestly, why now?”

Tohru made his way through the mountain forest as he continued to grumble to himself.

As aforementioned, this area was so uninhabited that even animal trails

barely existed, let alone hardened, well-treaded footpaths. Tohru was used to this kind of thing so it was fine for him, but for an amateur it could be quite dangerous.

And yet...

“—Hm?”

Suddenly, Tohru stopped.

A sound had reached his ears.

“What was that...?”

He held his breath, pricked up his ears and listened. He heard the noise again—it sounded like something rustling in the bushes. It seemed to be gradually approaching him.

Something was moving, hidden within the bushes.

“...An animal?”

Looking closer, he saw that in addition to the noise, the brush was quivering.

By taking note of the size of the swaying section of brush, he surmised the size of the thing hidden within.

It looked to be about the size of a human—or larger.

In an instant he eyeballed the distance between him and the creature: about 15 meters(1). Even in a mountain forest where the footing was unsure, an animal would easily be able to cover that distance in an instant.

Tohru prepared himself.

If it was a deer or a boar, he thought he might hunt it. If it was a bear or a wolf, it'd be in his best interests to let it go.

And if in the worst case, it was a Feyra...well, he would think about that when the time came.

Giving up might be a solid option at that point.

*It's probably not a Feyra, though, he thought calmly.*

Then—

“...?”

*Thud. Thud.* He heard a noise that couldn’t possibly belong to an animal.

Tohru searched through his memories, trying to find a noise to compare it to. It sounded artificial and hard, maybe like a rock clunking against a wooden box? At the very least, it wasn’t an animal approaching, and there was no insect alive that would ever make that sound.

Listening closer—he could hear a noise like something being dragged.

*What the hell is that?*

It couldn’t be a hunter or lumberjack.

So...

“...”

Suddenly, a face popped out from the brush.

“...Ah?”

As Tohru stared at it, a crease formed between his eyebrows.

Its presence here was like an anomaly, or just plain weird. Anyway, however you phrase it, it was certainly not what he was expecting to see.

To get straight to the point, it was...a human girl.

She looked to be in the ballpark of about fourteen or fifteen.

She was cute, and had lovely, refined features.

The dim mountain forest had become darker now due to the approaching midday, and the remaining vestiges of sunlight filtering through the trees tinged her long, silver hair, making it glisten. Affixed to her head were white hair ornaments, and her large violet eyes blinked rapidly in surprise as she looked around to survey her surroundings. In some respects, she looked like a small animal.

At any rate, she was not an aggressive, ferocious beast.

Actually, just from a glimpse at that frail body covered by dark clothing, she looked more like the prey.

It was curious enough that this petite girl was wandering aimlessly through the mountainside all by herself, but this had gone beyond “curious” and into “just plain weird.” Her outfit was mostly dark, but it also had various decorative cloths and personal accessories attached to it. It was in no way suitable for mountain climbing. It looked like broken twigs and remnants of shrubbery were stuck all over her as well.

Of course, she didn’t have a hatchet to cut through the undergrowth or any kind of walking stick.

Most hikers through this area were at least fairly experienced, whereas this girl looked like she was on a downtown stroll or belonged at some aristocrat’s ball.

Dressed like that, she could easily encounter some kind of mishap.



She was taking the mountain lightly. With that getup, Tohru couldn't imagine anything else.

However—

“...What is...that?”

Even though it had only been an instant, he had mistaken the small girl for a large animal. This was primarily because of the thing she was carrying—he thought it was part of some creature’s body. For some reason she was carrying something cumbersome on her back—a large dark red case, which was probably why the brush had moved so much.

No, it wasn’t just a “case”—

“....A coffin?”

The fact that it was oblong was already telling—it was an octagonal shape stretched out. The only thing that Tohru could compare it to in his mind was a coffin. It just couldn’t be anything else.

Of course, the coffin-like object was big enough to fit a fully-grown adult inside, and as such was much larger than the girl herself. There was a leather belt around it, allowing her to carry it on her back as she walked. Carrying it like this would normally cause it to suffer scrapes or even break, but it seemed to be quite sturdy. The surface was entirely free of scratches and blemishes.

But just what was the deal here?

Even if the coffin were completely empty, it should have been quite heavy.

At the very least, a little girl like her had no business in the mountains. Did she intend to use the coffin as a sleeping bag? But it had a lamp installed on the side...

A coffin would probably be safer to sleep in than some poorly-stitched sleeping bag, though...

“—Hey.”

Completely dumbfounded, Tohru rose from the brush as well and called out to her.

“That thing. What are you doing with that?”

“...!”

The girl jumped in surprise and turned her head in Tohru’s direction.

Her violet eyes were large to begin with, but when she saw him they opened even wider.

“What the hell are you doing out here in the mountains, you...”

In a sense, he could ask himself the same question—

“...!?”

But he was forced to stop mid-sentence.

With a rough noise, the girl and the coffin sunk back into the bushes.

“Hey...?”

At this unexpected reaction Tohru jolted forward and called out to her, but he then saw and heard a trail of rustling brush move away from him in a flash. It appeared that she had fled—and in quite the hurry, too.

“...”

But a mountain forest was different from a town in that it was much easier to get lost in.

Even maintaining a straight path was difficult. There were many hardships to be found when one was not used to mountain-hiking: it wasn’t uncommon for amateurs to lose their way while trying to avoid various obstacles, and unwittingly go around in circles as a result.

And in fact—

“....”

Squinting, Tohru observed the girl hunkered down in the bushes. She kept moving in one direction until he heard a “thump” and a short yelp like “Gyaa!?” It looked like something had caused her to stop. She headed back in another direction, but then he heard another “thump” and a dull crash, and she stopped once more. Then she moved to the side, and so on and so on until she finally ended up right back at her original position in front of Tohru.

And so—

“...”

“...Welcome back.”

Her face, wearing an expression like *Is it safe now?*, had popped out of the brush once more. He wondered if she had finally learned her lesson. By now they were about two meters away from each other—if he took one or two steps and extended his hand, he could have easily reached her.

“...!?”

The girl’s face froze in surprise.

Because Tohru was used to dealing with the stony-faced Akari, he had to admit that seeing an expression like that was pretty amusing.

Flapping her arms and legs in panic, she looked to her left and right, and then once more in front of her.

Then after she had panicked for a bit, she became still all of a sudden and spoke.

“A...”

“ ‘A’ “?”

The girl pointed at the puzzled Tohru with such force it seemed there should have been a snapping sound, an accusatory glare on her face.

“Attack?”

“Attack? Who’s attacking? Who’s being attacked?”

It wasn’t like Tohru didn’t understand what she was trying to say, but he went ahead and asked anyway.

“You. Me.”

After pointing at Tohru, she pointed to herself.

How could one put this... maybe it was just him, but all her actions seemed somewhat high-and-mighty. For a first meeting with someone, it was like she didn’t hold anything back. On the other hand, though, she seemed she was on

high alert.

“...”

“...”

Tohru stared at the girl with half-lidded eyes.

The girl glared at Tohru with upturned eyes.

The tension in the air between the two was clearly one-sided.

Then—

“You want me to attack you?”

“...”

The girl shook her head vigorously.

“Bandit—not?”

“If you’re asking if I’m one of those lone bandits prowling around, I’m not.”

“.....”

“Sorry, but I don’t have a job at present.”

“.....Hunter?”

The girl knitted her brows as she stared at Tohru’s face.

“Like I said, I don’t have an occupation.”

Tohru heaved a sigh.

Sure, he would catch small animals on occasion. But you couldn’t call that “professionally hunting.”

“Food became an issue, so...I’m out here gathering wild plants.”

Truth be told, it sounded pathetic even to himself...but if that was enough to get him down, it wouldn’t have gotten to the point where Akari had to come calling with her hammer.

“...Understand.”

The girl gave a nod of assent as she said this.

For some reason, her facial expression then changed into a triumphant smile, and she thrust her index finger right at the tip of Tohru's nose like she had come to some conclusion.

"Pauper!"

"Well, I guess there's no such thing as a wealthy freeter, but...being called poor over and over again really is irritating."

He said this with a sigh.

While Tohru felt some resistance at being called a pauper by a complete stranger, it was true that he was poor to the point where he didn't even have money for the day's breakfast. However, this girl didn't look like she was scorning or berating him—it was more like he was some rare object that gave her great pleasure to look at.

"Pauper. Understand. Pauper."

She nodded her head again and again.

*Who is this girl?*

It was almost like even though she knew the word "pauper" and its definition, she had never actually seen one in person before.

"Forget about me, let's talk about you. Y-O-U. What are you doing here?" He glanced over her shoulder at the dark red coffin thing she was carrying. "And what's that coffin-looking thing on your back? To begin with—don't you know that even the locals tend to avoid this place?"

"...Ah."

Once the girl turned her head and glanced at the coffin she was carrying on her back, her eyes widened.

Panicked, she unstrapped herself from the coffin and pushed it down into the bushes, then stood in front of it—was she trying to keep it hidden? Again with upturned eyes, she returned Tohru's gaze and spoke.

"...You saw?"

"Well, yeah, of course I can see it," Tohru replied in disbelief.

It was larger than the girl herself. It'd be impossible to not see it.

"Did not see."

".....?"

"You. Didn't see. This."

"...Oh, ok, I...guess..." Tohru said while scratching his cheek.

Then, right in front of him—

"I didn't think...I'd meet anyone...here in the mountains...Thought it was...a good idea..."

She mumbled under her breath.

This time, it wasn't the official language of the continent. It sounded like Laeke, used primarily up north. Tohru had been thinking it was weird that her dialogue thus far had all been broken speech, but that appeared to be because she was from the north. She wasn't at all accustomed to the official language, and it was obvious just from listening that she was more fluent in Laeke.

"Are you some kind of criminal or something?"

The girl seemed to be willing to go as far as to climb a mountain in order to not be seen, so that was the only thing that came to mind. Though overall it was difficult to get to Del Solant, there was a road passing through a valley that horse-drawn carriages often used. Unless the girl's circumstances really were that dire, she wouldn't need to be dragging such a large piece of luggage out on a path that could barely be called one.

"Disrespectful! Impolite! Rude!"

She glared at him, pointing once more.

Incidentally, she had returned to using the official language of the continent. It wasn't like his Laeke was bad, but it was as he thought: she was still easier to understand when she used the common tongue.

"Then why are you so concerned about someone seeing you?"

"...!?"

The girl stayed silent, but looked like she was taken aback.

It seemed like she hadn't counted on Tohru being able to parse out her Laeke.

“...”

Once again, the girl glared at him with upturned eyes.

Her face drooped. Fear, anxiety, irritation, wariness...many different emotions appeared upon the girl's face in succession. Her eyes were like a stray cat's that didn't know whether to consider the other party an ally or an enemy.

“Well, it doesn't matter. Even if you are a criminal or whatever, it's no concern of mine,” said Tohru with a shrug.

Until just a few years ago, war had been raging on the continent. Killing was a given. Stealing was a given. No small number of people had been born and raised with those values. Plus, because it was a period of postwar confusion, countries had been forced to reorganize the way they were run, and new laws were still in development. Even the delineation of what was and wasn't a crime was still fuzzy. Though Tohru himself had no intention of becoming a criminal, he didn't really think it was that strange for there to be one on the run.

Right. He really didn't think anything of it.

“Anyway...”

Tohru heaved a sigh.

Thanks to this brief exchange of dialogue, Tohru thought he at least had an idea, albeit a rough one, of what was going on.

This girl was an outsider, and had no idea what this place was like.

From what he could gather from her wardrobe, it was likely as aforementioned—she had no experience whatsoever in hiking mountains. She looked like an uppity cloistered girl who knew nothing of the world.

“You...do you have some business in Del Solant?”

“Affirmative,” the girl said.

“And how long have you been hiking this mountain?”

“Three days.”

“...”

This was bad.

Tohru sized the girl up for a while, from head to toe.

“Question.”

“Mui?”

“Got any money?”

“Mun-ny? Ah, ‘money’?”

The girl blinked her violet eyes.

Then, with a look as though she finally understood, she gave a large nod and, if that wasn’t enough, she even clasped her hands together with a “pon” sound.

“Understand. Highway robbery!”

“Wait, who’s a highway robber? Don’t point at me!”

Tohru smacked away the hand that was pointing straight at him so brazenly.

“Mu. Highway robber. Not?”

“I’m not, I swear!”

“Mugger?”

“No!”

“...Murderer?”

“Why do you want me to be some kind of outlaw?”

“Mu, mu...”

She crossed her arms and tilted her head.

*Does this girl want to be attacked or something?* he thought.

Tohru sighed.

“Breakfast for two. That’s your navigation fee.”

“...?”

With a puzzled expression, the girl stared at Tohru intently.

To this senseless girl Tohru said rudely,

“You want to get to Del Solant without being seen, right? I don’t know your deal or anything, but keep going as you are, and you won’t even make it there in a week.”

“....Mu!?”

“You went through all the trouble of hiking this mountain and didn’t think to look at a map? If you had hiked the proper way, it wouldn’t have even taken you three days. It’s obvious that you’re completely lost.”

After all, a bit ago she had managed to go around in circles even when running from Tohru. She had probably been intending to go straight through the mountain, but got turned around along the way. Regardless of whether or not there was a clear path...the mountain’s vegetation was so dense that it was easy to lose track of what direction you were in.

“Shocking truth.”

“You should’ve realized!” Tohru shouted to the girl, whose eyes were as wide as saucers.

“I’ll lead the way if you treat me to breakfast. Oh, and my sister too.”

“...Mu.”

She folded her arms, her brows furrowed.

Well, after a person you met in the middle of a mountain all of a sudden started demanding “navigation fees” and “breakfast”, of course she would be nonplussed.

“I told you before, didn’t I? I don’t have a job. It’s not like I’m proud of it, but I don’t even have breakfast money to—”

That was as far as he got.

*Moruzerun, Moruzerun, Erumun.*

He heard a bizarre noise.

No—that was wrong. It wasn’t a noise.

It was a voice.

A gloomy and cryptic voice speaking incomprehensible, bizarre words—the

low voice of a person.

*Seburun, Wamurun, Tourun.*

*Shunerun, Horun, Yarun.*

“...!”

The girl blinked in surprise.

Tohru threw himself on top of the girl.

They both happened simultaneously.

“Migya!?”

The girl let out a tiny scream at this sudden development.

As he pushed the girl’s petite body to the ground—Tohru felt something graze his back with intense force.

“Shit...!” Tohru groaned. “Man...this sucks!”

Without asking for permission, Tohru wrapped his arms around her torso—and kicked off the ground. If they had stayed put like that, they would have been killed for sure. There was a strong possibility that they could also be killed while running, though.

“—Wait, what the hell!?” Tohru shouted unconsciously. Something was off. Her body was strangely heavy—or rather, it was like something was weighing on it from behind. Once he turned around, he saw that she was gripping onto the leather belt around the coffin, and the dark coffin was dragging along behind him, clunking as it went.

Even under normal circumstances, the footing on this mountain was unstable, so keeping his balance while carrying her was especially tough, not to mention dragging the coffin along with it, which made running impossible.

“Just get rid of this thing already!”

“Refuse!”

The girl immediately replied.

Because he was behind her, Tohru could only see her flailing legs, her rear, and her back, so he couldn’t see her expression. If he had to take a guess,

however, it was likely one of irritation.

“Oh, shit!?” yelled Tohru.

A large, dark shadow flew over him.

It smashed through various trees and branches, repeatedly drawing arcs in its flight path, until at least landing right next to the fleeing Tohru and the girl—

“I knew it...it’s a Feyra...!”

It was...a strange thing resembling a horse.

It jumped about nimbly between the trees, had a strange dark protuberance on its forehead, and carnivorous tusks protruded from its mouth. You could call it a horse, sure, but it was really a...

“Unicorn...!”

This horse-like thing was a wondrous living creature. Its hooves, its legs, and its body structure all resembled a horse, so it was specialized to gallop quickly over a wide, flat plain. At the very least, this thing had no business being here in this mountain forest full of obstacles.

But this very creature called a unicorn was a Feyra, and so simply calling it a “unicorn” didn’t fly. While it was similar to a horse in that it had a large build, it was more agile than a squirrel or even a monkey, and could move on a three-dimensional plane.

This unicorn was a carnivore and skilled hunter with the shape of a horse.

“Shit...”

Tohru groaned in irritation.

A Feyra out in the mountains—to try and outrun this creature would be the height of foolishness. Not to mention the literal baggage he was carrying made it impossible to run anyway.

And so—

“No way around it.”

There weren’t many options.

He'd been in these mountains often, so he had a pretty good idea of the geography. Looking up, Tohru noted the location of the sun beyond the treetops and determined the angle—he used this to derive his current location.

“Hey!”

Tohru said to the girl he continued to embrace.

“I retract my previous statement. Hold onto that coffin for dear life.”

“Mu?”

*Moruzerun, Moruzerun, Erumun.*

*Seburun, Wamurun, Tourun.*

*Shunerun, Horun, Yarun.*

They heard the voice again.

And so—

“Let’s go!”

His field of vision that had been obscured by plants suddenly became clear.

Just as he had remembered and predicted.

Then—

“Hold your breath!!” Tohru yelled as he kicked off the ground forcefully.

And in the next moment—

“Nya?”

A dark path was engraved into the air with violent force.

The girl let out a moronic-sounding noise.

Tohru jumped off a cliff, and he, the girl, and the coffin all fell towards the marsh directly below them.

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#### TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

1. The original unit of conversion in the novel is “meltors”, but that doesn’t

make sense to anyone and they seem to be the exact same thing.

## Part 5

The fantastic black horselike creature had been leaping around the mountain forest with the speed of a loosed arrow, but the moment Tohru and Chaika vanished, it stopped.

It now stood there stock still—a far cry from its earlier behavior. Not a hint of its ferocity remained; on the contrary, its eyes had gone hollow, like it had lost all life.

Then—

“...Hmm?”

A thicket of bushes parted with a rustle, revealing the figure of a man.

On his small body he wore a cloak, olive brown with swatches of dark green, in order to blend in with the vegetation. This made him indistinguishable from the surrounding environment. As a bonus, the cloak masked the outlines of his body, making for even more effective camouflage.

Not to mention the man had been thorough.

His face and cleanly-shaven bald head were covered in paint mimicking the cloak’s pattern, and on his back was a bag as long as a greatsword, similarly wrapped in a dark green and olive brown obi sash.

“They got away, huh...” the man murmured.

The paint on his face made it difficult to tell what kind of expression he was making. He fearlessly stepped up beside the unicorn and peered down into the ravine that Tohru and the girl had jumped into.

“Guess I was ill-prepared. Should I just wait for Sir Gillette to get here...?”

He muttered to himself as if gathering his thoughts.

Finally—

“No. I won’t let this great opportunity go to waste.”

A white crack spread across the man’s camouflaged face—the man was

baring his teeth in a smile.

“Now, how’s about we tie this up in go?”

Facing the statue-like unicorn, the man set his bag down.

\*

He must have only blacked out for several seconds. Any longer, and they would have surely drowned.

“Hgah...!”

The instant Tohru regained consciousness, he checked to make sure he had his arm securely around the girl.

She was coughing up suds and flailing around wildly, but she was alive and conscious. Fortunately, the coffin she held onto with religious zeal had acted as a flotation device. Tohru had already figured as much judging from the sound it made when it dragged the ground, but there seemed to be hardly anything inside, if anything at all, since it was buoyant enough to support both Tohru and the girl.

“Ku....Ugh...”

He stretched out his other arm with all his strength. There were branches hanging down from the trees on both sides of the riverbank, but he wasn’t close enough to grab any of them. However, he remembered that it was common to see the water level in a riverbank rise due to heavy rain, which would in turn erode the soil and expose the tree roots underneath. Eventually he found one of these roots, grabbed it and successfully pulled himself, the girl, and the coffin against the raging current and back up onto solid ground.

“Haa...Haa...Haa...”

He stretched out on top of a mossy riverside rock exhausted, gasping in ragged breaths. He had the feeling that that was the majority of his stamina gone.

A fleeting glance to the side and he saw that the girl was much the same; she was coughing and hacking violently. Even so, she made sure her coffin was unharmed—it must have been something very important to her. Then, slowly,

she turned to face Tohru.

“Abrupt. Forceful. Excessive—”

But that was as far as she got.

“Mu...!?”

The girl froze in place, her eyes wide.

“...What’s wrong?”

“Blood...!?”

The girl pointed in front of her.

Thinking that this could mean nothing good, Tohru got up and looked down at the rock he’d been laying on.

It was dyed in the color of rust.

It was blood, no question. The river water from Tohru’s wet clothes and the blood from the wound on his back had mixed on the rock, dyeing it a pale brown. Blood was different from normal pigments in that it didn’t become a light pink when mixed with water—it became a color closer to brown.

“Ah...” Tohru said listlessly. “Well, I screwed that up, huh.”

“Screwed...?”

The girl came closer to Tohru, gazing at his back intently.

“Because, protected me?”

“Ah...yeah...I guess.”

Tohru, of course, couldn’t see his own back, but he could imagine the damage. It didn’t seem like it had reached the bone or anything, but it felt like a gaping wound. He could sense that it was a straight line across his back, as if it had been inflicted by some kind of blade.

“Huh. How’d that happen...”

“Urgent. Treatment, required.”

The girl then started turning out her pockets feverishly as if searching for something. A good amount of water splashed out, but it didn’t seem like she

found anything useful.

“...None,” she muttered dejectedly.

“Uh, no, I’ll probably be alright...” said Tohru wearily.

After all, he knew his own body best. If he had continued to be submerged in the river, there was a chance that he could have died from blood loss or even frozen to death due to hypothermia. However, the wound hadn’t cut deeply into muscle or bone, and he knew the bleeding had already begun to stem.

Yet...

“All those frugal meals have taken their toll, huh?”

His stamina was lacking. He had lost blood, and the freezing river water had sapped his energy. A heavy exhaustion had fallen upon him. Not to mention it had been a long while since he’d had a decent meal.

“Guess we can’t escape, then,” Tohru said as if it didn’t even concern him.

Even in this life-threatening situation, neither his tone of voice nor facial expression displayed even one inkling of urgency. It wasn’t that he was overly optimistic or hopeful, either; that was just how he was.

“We’re no match for a Feyra—and especially not a unicorn.”

The girl remained silent.

Despite her earlier haughty attitude, she seemed like a dunce in some respects...but she was at least able to understand the gravity of being chased around by a Feyra in the mountains.

“It’s useless. Probably best to give up. It’s checkmate,” Tohru said with a shrug. Pain shot up his back, and he winced. “...Man, what a dull life I led.”

He made that sudden judgment.

“Dull, life?”

The girl blinked as she spoke up at last. It was almost like she had never heard those words before.

“Give up?”

“....Basically.”

Tohru nodded noncommittally, giving a wry smile.

“Perish?”

“Probably.”

“Problematic.”

“Well, yeah, obviously,” he said with another shrug.

“Death. Not afraid?” she asked, pointing at Tohru.

“Hm? Ah, well, I’d probably be lying if I said I wasn’t afraid, but—”

Tohru averted his eyes from the girl.

Why he did so was unknown even to himself.

“I don’t even know if it’s okay for me to be alive to begin with.”

He smiled a self-derisive smile.

“In...this kind of world.”

He didn’t know what to aim for.

He didn’t know what to wish for.

He didn’t want to do anything. Not anymore.

And it was too late for him to make something of himself.

He didn’t have any clear wishes or goals. He was merely living each day in a directionless, endless cycle.

Was there a proper occupation that suited him?

If so, what could it possibly be?

He could have worked for the sake of his daily bread, taken a bride at a suitable age, settled down in a small house in the corner of the district and lived an average life up to the day he died—yet he had no interest in spending his remaining time like that.

Just how much meaning did that really have?

Would it really be any different than dying right here?

For what reason was he even born?

He couldn't help but think that no matter how hard he worked, it wouldn't amount to hardly anything. The amount that a single human could do by himself was minuscule at best. He would live and die without making any sort of mark on the world.

There was nothing he could do. There was nothing he could leave behind.

His life was no better than that of an insect, or a beast.

A life goal.

A goal to work towards.

He'd had them, once upon a time. He once had full confidence in his purpose. But on that day, he'd had his ambitions abruptly snatched from him.

So when it came time for Tohru to do something, he would always question if it was even worth doing. For a year, he had done nothing but wallow in depravity.

Tohru began to speak in a voice that bordered on sulky.

"There was stuff I wanted to do back in the day."

He shrugged.

"But not anymore. It's all gone. Now the only thing I adhere to is the law of inertia."

"..."

The girl stared at Tohru for a while, her head tilted to the side, then finally...

"Rediscover."

She pointed at Tohru sternly, like she was giving him a command.

"Huh?"

"You will. Again. Start now. Once more," she said, as if it were the natural course of action.

But—

"It's too late for that."

“Why?”

“Truthfully? I have no aptitude for anything else.”

He had once had a purpose for living.

He spent every day working towards that purpose, so he didn’t have time to think otherwise or study any other techniques. Tohru was like a lump of clay already baked into the shape of a plate. It was too late to want to become a teacup. Even if he was told to live his life differently, it wasn’t so easy.

However—

“....”

The girl—

“Ouch!”

Suddenly started pounding on Tohru’s back repeatedly.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, you idiot!?”

“Ah. Sorry. Felt unsatisfied.”

“‘Felt unsatisfied’, my ass!”

It might not have been a deep wound, but having that area struck was definitely still quite painful.

“—Same.”

The girl suddenly pointed to herself.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Untalented. Same as you. Can do—very little.”

She reached over to the coffin beside her and slowly opened it up.

As he’d deduced from the fact that the coffin had been able to float in the river, it was mostly empty—however.

“—That’s...”

Tohru’s eyes went wide.

What the girl took out—was a steel device.

Based on its length, Tohru thought at first that it was some kind of mechanical spear...but no, this was different.

It was a long, long cylindrical shaft, into which numerous mechanical parts could be attached.

There was a scope, used to adjust aim.

There was a wooden grip and a bipod, used to fix it to the ground.

It was—a Gundo.

It was a device that wizards used when they wanted to fire their magic. Just as cavaliers used swords and archers used bows and arrows, wizards used their Gundo. In other words, having a Gundo was proof that you were a wizard.

“You...you’re a wizard?”

“Correct.”

The girl gave a small proud smile—and promptly got to work assembling her Gundo.

From the fact that it needed to be disassembled for storage it was already obvious, but...it was long, so long it even surpassed the girl’s own height. The cold black steel and the warm brown wood drew a strange contrast.

“This, all. Otherwise, useless. But...”

Lastly, the girl unfolded the bipod and set it on top of the coffin.

“With this, can do plenty.”

“So you mean...” Tohru narrowed his eyes.

He wasn’t a wizard himself, so he didn’t understand the details. However, he had heard a lot about the power wizards held.

Due to the size and weight of the Gundo, they required quite a bit of effort to operate, so they weren’t very portable. Basically, they required the user to either leave it in one place, or at least have some really solid footing.

However—magic was much more powerful than a sword or bow.

Given a considerably long range and plenty of time, a lone wizard could

potentially level an entire castle with a single shot. The man whose death had brought the era of war to an end, Arthur Gaz—also known as the Demon King, the Taboo Emperor, Emperor Gaz the Great Sage, and many other monikers—was said to have possessed magic so great that he had the potential to level entire mountains and dry up whole rivers.

So then...

“You mean to say that instead of running away from the unicorn...we can kill it?”

“Probably.”

A bold smile appeared on the girl’s face as she nodded.

She apparently had some degree of confidence in her ability as a wizard.

“However. During magic activation process—cannot move.”

“...Yeah, I bet.”

Naturally, with that overwhelming amount of power wizards had been scouted out and recruited for war, but the majority of them lacked the capability to fight on the front lines. Instead, they mostly provided support from the back. Having to use a cumbersome Gundo while taking into account the various minute adjustments for each particular location, it could even be said that the wizards were completely useless in close-quarters combat.

So that meant—

“Alright, so first let’s use surveillance magic to figure out where the Feyra is. Then, we can think about how to strike...”

That was all he had the time to say.

“...”

“...”

The girl froze in place.

Tohru heaved a sigh.

There was no need to turn around and look.

The scene behind him was clearly reflected in the girl's enlarged pupils—from amidst the trees, the figure of the horselike beast had appeared.

Then—

*Moruzerun, Moruzerun, Erumun.*

Protruding from the top of the unicorn's head was an organ which most people called a "horn." It was now emitting light.

It trembled on top of the unicorn's long, thin face, the light flickering intermittently, but the light didn't go out. On the contrary, the horn expanded on its own and began to draw a complicated pattern.

*Seburun, Wamurun, Tourun.*

*Shunerun, Horun, Yarun.*

It was—a magic circle.

Feyra.

That was the name given to creatures who could use magic.

Fundamentally, humans had to use Gundo to use magic. To be more precise, it was possible to use magic without a Gundo, but an unrealistic amount of preparation had to be made beforehand. Feyra, on the other hand, could innately use magic.



Their bodies had been furnished with the capability for compiling and invoking magic. In the unicorn's case, their elongated horn was the "vessel" where their magic was stored.

Which meant...

"Hey."

Tohru turned around and fixed his eyes upon the girl.

"How about I buy you some time?"

"Mui?"

"If I buy you some time, will you be able to use your magic?"

"...Affirmative."

She nodded.

Wizards didn't necessarily need to fire their magic from long-range. The only real reason wizards typically kept their distance from the enemy was to not get hit. In other words...if Tohru could allow the girl enough time to activate her magic, they would both be able to survive.

"A Feyra with that kind of power...this definitely won't be a cakewalk," he said, pulling his large hatchet from his waist.

Of course, it was an edged tool, so it was more used for slicing through annoying vegetation in a mountainous forest area. It wasn't really suited for hunting or combat.

But he couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth here. He had to use what was at his disposal.

A hatchet—and a skill he had mastered.

*"I am steel."*

Tohru murmured.

"...Mu?"

The girl responded reflexively, but Tohru did not reply. He was already in a state of extreme mental concentration, so while he technically heard the girl,

her voice didn't reach his consciousness.

*"Steel knows no fear. Steel knows no doubt."*

While there were parts of the chant he honestly couldn't consciously remember, the words came from his throat and slipped out his mouth nonetheless. He had repeated them so many times that they were ground into his being. Even after several years of inactivity, his ability to recite it had not diminished.

Did that make him happy, or just depress him further?

To tell the truth, the current Tohru didn't know, but...

*"When faced with my enemy, I hesitate not."*

It was some kind of "key".

A key to a dangerous weapon that he didn't normally use.

Each time he recited the chant, his body changed completely.

*"I am a weapon to destroy these."*

There were people who had battle skills and techniques drilled into them thoroughly, right down to their bones—and they became human weapons.

It wasn't a simple issue of leg or arm strength.

Their entire bodies—everything from their nerves to their physiology—was redefined and optimized for the purpose of combat.

Breathing for battle, heart beating for battle, only thinking about battle...a being like that was no longer human.

It was a weapon possessing human form and functions.

Their entire existence—everything they were—was now converged on one single objective, a tool for a solitary purpose.

However, that made living as a normal human rather difficult. Optimizing the body for battle meant doing away with normal, superfluous human functions.

A tool was a tool. Nothing resembling a human remained inside.

To be captured by the enemy in this state would be a dangerous situation indeed. After all, appealing to reason, loyalty, or faith was something that only a human could do.

Therefore, the ability to return back to that human state was necessary.

An ability to switch back and forth between human and weapon.

A group of people who realized this managed to make it a reality—and they built up a clan where they could pass down the technique.

It was known as—the hidden technique, “Iron-Blood Transformation.”

“Fuu...”

All of the hair on his body stood on end.

The muscles that had been lying dormant within him awakened, and his nerves began to heat up into battle mode. In this moment, Tohru ceased to be Tohru.

He was now a single sword.

His breathing, his heartbeat, his thoughts, everything was geared toward one purpose: to slaughter the enemy.

All emotions had vanished from his face.

No, to any onlooker it may have even looked like his entire physical form had suddenly changed color.

As a result of all the blood vessels in his body going into overdrive, a tattoo-like design had formed upon his body. The high-pressure energy coming off the surface of his skin was changing the rate that light was being refracted, causing the outlines of his body to emit a phosphorescent glow. His hair and eyes, both areas easily influenced by blood vessel activity, now looked red.

The figure of Tohru looked like a monster in human form.

However—

*Shunerun, Horun, Yarun.*

The unicorn finished chanting its spell.

The magic circle drawn by the tip of the unicorn’s horn revolved slowly and

flickered as if it were breathing. As expected, this type of Feyra wasn't one to be intimidated by something like a human changing color or appearance.

"Come and get me, you mule," Tohru said as he readied his hatchet.

The dark horse's outline became a blur.

In the next instant—

*Thud. Thud. Thud thud. Thudthudthudthudthud!*

The unicorn leapt at such a speed that it left an afterimage.

Its large dark build weaved through the trees effortlessly, drawing a complex path as it approached Tohru. No matter how much jumping power it had, that kind of movement would normally be impossible, and even more so since its legs were kicking off from nothing but empty air.

This unicorn was definitely using magic.

While its magic was activated, it was able to use anything and everything as a foothold—even the air itself. It was a monster that could run along walls and ceilings if necessary, confusing the eyes of its prey as it attacked. With each kick its body accelerated, eventually attaining the top speed of an arrow in flight. Being struck with those sharp tusks or large body at that speed would mean certain death.

The unicorn wasn't aiming for the girl, but for Tohru.

It was already obvious from its ability to use magic, but the Feyra was overall smarter than normal animals. At the very least, it was able to understand Tohru's provocation. It had probably prioritized Tohru as the more formidable foe, and thus was planning to deal with him first.

"Hah!"

Tohru let out a sharp breath as he brandished his hatchet.

Using both hands for support, he readied the weapon, but it crashed against the unicorn's tusk in the next instant. Sparks flew as the tusk met the edge of the blade.

"...."

Of course, Tohru's body mass wasn't enough to stop the unicorn's charge, so the dark Feyra's body collided with him and they both fell into the river—however, there was no trace of irritation or anger on his face. His expression remained terribly calm and collected; he was analyzing internally the situation that had been put before him. He didn't have time for superfluous things like "emotions". Even calling the beast a "mule" earlier had been nothing more than a tactic to provoke it.

A unicorn's hooves weren't sharp.

Therefore it would either have to use a ramming attack with its body or a slashing attack with its tusks to do any damage.

And since speed was its most distinctive attribute, it would aim for a one-shot kill. Once Tohru knew that it was going to be aiming for his throat area, he could block it no matter how much speed it had.

Then—

"I won't let you get away," Tohru muttered.

He twined both legs around the unicorn's neck.

"Gyooooohhh!"

The unicorn bellowed.

For a unicorn, underwater was most disadvantageous. Its ultra-high speed achieved through magic was enough to overwhelm any of the prey it normally hunted. However, movement in the water versus the air was severely limited—the water enveloping the unicorn resisted it. The result was that its speed was reduced to basically nil.

"Now it doesn't matter how fast you are!"

What's more, he was so close to the unicorn that speed didn't make a difference anyway. Hanging upside-down from the unicorn's neck with both legs, he raised his hatchet once again.

He was aiming for its jaw.

However...

There was the sound of screeching metal.

The unicorn bit into the hatchet with its sharp jaws. Turning its head aggressively, it had quite literally eaten Tohru's attack. With this, Tohru's only weapon was rendered unusable.

However...

"Gotcha," Tohru said with a confirming nod.

With both hands, he pushed the hatchet deep into the unicorn's mouth.

"And now you can't chant any of your spells!"

The core of the unicorn's magic was definitely its horn, but chanting was an essential component. Now, its jaws were preoccupied with holding back Tohru's hatchet. The moment it opened its mouth, the upper half of its head would be sliced off. Even a Feyra would die instantly if its brain separated from its body.

The unicorn's bloodshot eyes glared hard at Tohru. It was definitely shooting daggers of hatred with its gaze—a feat completely impossible for normal beasts.

"Now it's down to a battle of attrition."

Tohru spoke with no emotion.

The unicorn could no longer use magic.

Tohru couldn't let go of the hatchet.

It was like an endurance contest between two crossed swords. As fang and hatchet grated together, the river water was carrying them downstream.

*I think I'm the one at a disadvantage here, though,* Tohru thought, as if he was an innocent bystander.

All that activity had caused the wound on Tohru's back to open up again. If he stayed underwater, he would either bleed or freeze to death.

It went without saying that in terms of physical strength, the as-of-yet unhurt large unicorn had the upper hand.

However...

## Part 6

After making sure the Gundo's bolt was drawn back, the girl pumped it once.

*K-chak*—once the cartridge was loaded, the spring mechanism's "spell drum" began to rotate and emit a clear crackle.

"Mm..."

Lastly, she used her right hand to push her long hair back and feel around for the tattoo of a crest on the back of her neck.

Once she'd confirmed with the feeling in her fingertips that the crest was still there, she pulled a connecting cable out from her Gundo and, wrapping it around her neck like a choker, she connected the cable's crest to the crest on her own neck. She then felt her consciousness becoming one with the Gundo.

"...'The Ripper,'" she muttered, confirming the spell she was going to use. It was one of the simplest spells she had at her disposal, meaning it could be invoked quickly. In other words, it was a useful spell for this situation.

With a deep breath, the girl started to chant the spell.

"...*Korukto...Erumu...*"

The spell buzzed to life. A magic circle began to take shape, and a large number of complex blue patterns floated up around her.

"...*Naikto...Inte...Nainto...Wamue...*"

She continued her chant, choosing her magic words carefully.

For using magic effectively over long distances, it was crucial to be able to make minute adjustments that fit the situation, taking into account everything from temperature and humidity to the stars and ley lines. It was of the utmost importance to verify each of these things one by one and optimize the magic spells accordingly, because two separate activation sequences for the same magic spell could change subtly depending on the time and place.

"*Wamu...Miruta...Ru...*"

The bluish-white magic circle rotated around the girl.

The many floating patterns all meshed together, forming a new shape. The magic circle had looked complicated and chaotic at first, but it was becoming more organized and unified in accordance with the girl's words.

It was like many scattered pieces coming together to form a whole.

Then—

\*

Unexpectedly, it was Tohru's hatchet that was the first to give out.

“—!”

With a horrible screeching noise, the unicorn bit off the edge of the blade. After shaking its head and spitting out the broken pieces, the Feyra began to chant another spell.

With Tohru still clinging to its neck, it kicked off of the water's surface and flew way up into the air.

*Thudthudthudthudthudthud!*

As its legs pounded the empty air, it climbed higher and higher. Weaving through the branches of all kinds of trees, it leapt out of the forest—then, without warning, its body twisted in reverse—

“...!”

—and subsequently made a beeline for the ground. On top of gravity increasing the speed of its descent, it was using acceleration magic to run even faster.

It was like the unicorn was challenging Tohru to a game of chicken.

If he let go of the unicorn while in the air, it would bite him to death in an instant. He didn't have wings or magic, so evading in the air would be out of the question. He didn't have a weapon that would allow him to block the attack anymore, either. It'd be over for him the second he let go.

However, if he continued to hold on, he would crash into the ground along with the unicorn. It was likely that if that were to happen, they would explode into pieces of meat scattering in all directions.

—Not good.

Tohru and the unicorn were both falling headfirst.

Once he realized that its acceleration was an attack directed at him, Tohru made a decision. If the unicorn wasn't intending to kill itself as well, it would surely have to slow down at some point and kill its momentum instead by kicking the air. That would be the time to let go. If he then jumped off in the opposite direction of the unicorn's path, then he ought to be able to put a bit of distance between them, which would buy him a bit of time.

But—

“—!”

His leg slipped a bit.

*This is my limit, huh...*

Tohru bit his lip.

He had thought he could hold on for a bit longer, but the river had truly taken its toll. It had messed up his body temperature and blood flow, so more stamina had been sapped from him than expected. The enhancement of his body through “Iron-Blood Transformation” didn’t revive his stamina; as a matter of fact, it burned it up even faster.

Feeling like he was coming loose but having no strength left to readjust, Tohru released himself from the unicorn and into the sky.

The unicorn seemed to see its chance and, kicking nothing but the empty air, it decelerated and whipped around.

Unarmed and unable to use magic, Tohru had no way of guarding his body from its next attack.

In that moment—

“...Now.”

Suddenly.

“Come, ‘The Ripper!’”

The girl shouted.

And in the next instant—

—!

It was literally only an instant.

But...in his current transformed state, Tohru was able to see everything in detail.

The magic circle seeped out from the air and coiled around the unicorn many times over. As it revolved, it instantaneously converged on one point and vanished inside the unicorn's body.

Then.

“Gyoahhhhh!?”

A roar of anguish thundered across the forest.

As if some invisible edged blade had sliced it apart, the unicorn's body tore into two—both its left and right sections were blown apart.

Fresh blood spattered down like rain.

The exploded Feyra didn't fall directly to the ground; rather, the pieces crashed into the trunks of the trees that were nearby, causing large amounts of blood to drip down when they slipped off.

“....!”

Summoning all his remaining strength, Tohru extended his arm. He tried to grab onto to one of the many branches in the area, but it broke, so he tried again and hooked his fingers around another branch. This broke the speed of his fall, and just before falling to the ground he successfully grabbed a particularly thick branch.

“...”

Panting heavily, Tohru checked his distance from the ground—and jumped.

His body made a thud as it hit the damp soil. He glanced at the bisected Feyra just to be sure, but of course it was no longer moving.

It was dead.

The Feyra—had been killed.

“I guess...we did it.”

Tohru muttered.

“*My battle has ended.*”

As he chanted the keywords, he began to change.

“*I am man...*”

His consciousness, along with his five senses, started to return to normal—his body, which had been hardened into steel, was now recomposing itself into something that resembled a man once more. A feeling of something resembling numbness spread through his body.

Truthfully, he wasn’t necessarily thrilled to have survived, nor was he elated at “winning” the fight.

But...

“...”

What was this?

Some strange sense of accomplishment had manifested deep inside him. As some new, unknown aspect of himself began to worm its way in...the girl called to him from the other side of the river.

“Unhurt?”

“...Yeah.”

Groaning with severe exhaustion, Tohru dragged himself across the river to the girl. As she disassembled her weapon, she spoke in a slightly fearful tone.

“Shocking.”

“What is?”

“Strong.”

The girl pointed her finger at the tip of Tohru’s nose.

“....Oh...”

He heaved a long sigh.

It wasn't something he felt he had to keep secret from this young girl.

"Well, I was a saboteur originally."

"Saboteurs" were a specialized class of warriors that excelled on the battlefield.

In contrast with cavaliers that honored formality and etiquette, they were in charge of all kinds of dirty jobs on the field like assassinations, sabotage, and reconnaissance. Rather than swearing allegiance to a single nation, most were hired by a wide variety of nations, much like mercenaries. It was more convenient for the employer to hire people they could cut loose at any time if necessary. Such people were called saboteurs, and they lent out their talents in order to make a living.

But...

"My purpose vanished along with the battlefield," Tohru said in a self-deprecating tone.

Yes.

Saboteurs were only useful in the midst of combat. Now, in this world of peace, the powerful and influential only considered their talents a nuisance because their abilities lent well to revolts and uprisings.

As a result...the saboteurs' homes were crushed by royal decree, including the village of Acura where Tohru and the rest of his clan grew up.

Tohru and the others should have all been slaughtered as well; however, the saboteur town of Acura had gained information which allowed them to escape ahead of time. They were probably still on the run.

From the moment they were born, they had been raised to become saboteurs.

Being a saboteur meant forsaking your entire being for the purpose of battle.

But—Tohru had that snatched away from him before even setting out for his first battle.

There were no battlefields anywhere on the continent anymore, and no one wanted saboteurs of Acura around. A small fraction of saboteurs were employed by nobles, but the rest of them had no choice but to abandon their saboteur way of life.

They were born for battle.

They were raised for battle.

They died for battle.

That was the way of the Acura, and was also their pride.

People of Acura were only able to associate with the world through combat.

Aside from battle, Tohru knew nothing. He had never known anything else.

And so, now—

“You, useful.”

Hearing the girl’s voice, Tohru came back to his senses.

“...Huh?”

“Saved. Because, you, here.”

The girl folded her arms, speaking plainly. It seemed like she was trying to cheer him up.

It wasn’t flattery or common courtesy; he could tell that she genuinely meant it. She could have been trying to deceive him, sure, but she just didn’t seem like that kind of person.

“...Well, this kind of stuff doesn’t happen very often.”

“Strongly agree.”

The girl smiled.

Then...

“You, reassignment.”

“Huh?”

“You, guide.”

“...Ah.”

Now that she mentioned it, he had offered that.

“Nice to meet...um...”

The girl tilted her head.

“...Tohru.”

He realized she had asked for his full name and continued.

“Tohru Acura. And you are?”

“Chaika Ga...”

She started to say, and then shook her head.

“Er...Chaika Trabant.”

The saboteur, Tohru Acura.

The wizard, Chaika Trabant.

The two were pulled together by fate—of course, at this time, they didn’t even have an inkling of what would possibly await them in the future.

# **Chapter 2: The Younger Sister's Determination**



## Part 1

The sound of tableware clinking together rang out.

“...”

In the midst of the astonished gazes focused on him, Tohru ate his meal without a word.

It wasn't like his manners were exemplary to begin with, but right now he was stuffing his face with reckless abandon, not stopping once to savor the food.

Cram in a mouthful. Chew. Gulp it down. Take a swig of water, then cram more inside. Repeat.

Over and over again, as if it were a mechanical process.

He looked neither pleased nor perturbed by the quality of the food. Though there was probably no greater insult to the chef, Tohru wasn't even tasting it. He was eating only to replenish his bodily nutrients.

“...”

It had been only a little over three hours since then.

Upon gathering wild plants in the forest he'd come across a lone girl, an encounter which had eventually brought him face-to-face with a Feyra unicorn. He had lost most of his energy and a lot of blood after protecting the girl from the unicorn and buying her time to activate her magic. On top of all that, he'd activated a technique that he hadn't used in about two years, “Iron-Blood Transformation”.

This “Iron-Blood Transformation” in particular consumed a horribly large amount of his stamina.

To be honest, it was a miracle he was still standing. The skill had siphoned all his strength, and he was now essentially walking the tightrope between consciousness and unconsciousness.

As a result, Tohru found himself to be ferociously hungry, and their first stop

once back in Del Solant was a diner. Incidentally, the stack of empty plates in front of him had held enough food for more than five people.

It was already early afternoon, and the diner was bustling.

At first, the people around Tohru didn't pay him any mind, but after a while they could no longer ignore the fact that a young boy was downing all this food, stacking plate after plate without a word.

"...Hey, Pops."

After cleaning his sixth plate, Tohru looked up.

"One more just like that."

"...Yeah, yeah, I gotcha."

Through a small window that connected the kitchen with the dining room, he saw the chef nod, looking irritated.

However—

"Eat, too much," muttered the silver-haired, violet-eyed girl with a frown as she watched Tohru.

Chaika Trabant.

That was what she had told Tohru to call her. He knew next to nothing about her, truthfully, but the important thing was that she had said she would pay for the meal. Tohru was penniless, and he didn't have an ounce of pride.

"Unreasonable. Eat, too much. Stomach, shocking."

"You've got the money, don't you?"

"..."

Chaika gave a nod, but didn't look happy about it.

"Then no big deal. People get hungry after they work, y'know."

"..."

Well, she *had* said she would treat him to breakfast as compensation for guiding her here. But she was probably also thinking that not precisely confirming the amount, or rather, the budget beforehand was a mistake.

Tohru then took a piece of bread out of a basket beside him and began to devour that as well, tearing the bread into small strips.

He wasn't just eating anything and everything he could. Actually, Tohru had been taught that in order to replenish nutrients most effectively, the order in which he ate mattered. The brain sent signals to the stomach to release digestion enzymes based on the stomach's current state, and he was coinciding his eating habits with when he thought his stomach would be releasing those enzymes. So this manner of eating was actually pretty effective.

Tohru had just finished scarfing his bread, when—

“...Dear brother.”

He froze in place.

For some reason, out of the blue, every patron in the restaurant froze as well.

No, for it to be “out of the blue” meant that there was absolutely no reason for it. It was more like an instinct. When a rabbit comes face-to-face with a tiger, it instinctively cowers. It was likely the diner patrons were experiencing the same phenomenon.

“You didn’t come back, so I was worried.”

“...”

“What on earth is my dear brother doing here?”

“...”

Tohru mustered up his willpower, and turned around to face the entrance of the restaurant.

Standing there was—a single girl.

She had a long, lean figure, and black hair tied in a ponytail. Her eyes narrowed into long slits were beautiful, but—when she stared at you with those half-lidded eyes, there was an intimidating air about her.

Akari. Tohru’s younger sister.

“Dear brother.”

She briskly made her way through the restaurant, toward Tohru and Chaika’s

table.

Instinctively, the restaurant's patrons moved out of her way, making a path for her. They had no idea why she was here. Her eyebrows weren't raised in anger nor was her face crimson, but she gave off a raging heat as she walked nonetheless. None of them could hide their fear.

"Oh, Akari—no, well, this is..."

Panicked, Tohru struggled to find the words.



Come to think of it, it was already the middle of the day—though he had left the house with the intent of procuring breakfast for the two of them, it was now way too late for that. With no consideration towards his hungry sister he'd left at the house, he had put down enough food for six people, and was about to pick up his seventh plate. There was absolutely no more room for excuses.

Conclusion: All he could do was earnestly apologize.

“...Sorry. I forgot.”

“...”

Rather than considering her brother's grandiose apology, Akari narrowed her eyes at him, and then looked behind and noticed Chaika, whose eyes were wide in surprise.

Then—

“...I smell blood,” she murmured.

“...Ah.”

Tohru grimaced.

As a stopgap measure, Tohru's back, which had been sliced open by the unicorn's tusk in one go, had been stitched up with some needle and thread which Chaika had on hand—both the clothes and the skin—so he had thought he was pretty inconspicuous. As expected of his sister, she seemed to have noticed something unusual about her brother immediately.

Then—

“Dear brother.”

“Ah, no, this is just...”

“It might be unbecoming for someone like me to say this, but...”

“Huh?”

“Just what do you think you're doing, deflowering this girl that looks to be a child?”

“...”

Tohru looked at Chaika.

Chaika didn't seem to know what she meant, since she was just staring blankly.

"Akari."

"What is it, dear brother?"

"There are all sorts of things I'd like to say to that, but now's not the time. Point is, you're wrong."

"Is that so?" Akari tilted her head. "Then what am I misunderstanding? Please enlighten your stupid sister, dear brother. This scent clinging to you is without a doubt that of a deflowered girl on the cusp of womanhood."

"Suspect a wound first!" Tohru shouted, striking the table.

Akari tilted her head to the other side. "But that would be strange."

"What's so strange about it?"

"It'd be strange if you got injured just going to the mountains."

"..."

Tohru heaved a sigh.

Well, the fact that she had faith in him to that extent made him somewhat glad.

"Moreover, leading around a girl you don't even know, I doubt you'd be able to keep your sexual desires in check."

"Don't say dirty things like that!"

After all, they were currently in a restaurant full of people.

"But if that's the case, you always have your non-blood-related younger sister right here, so it would be more logical for you to express your sexual desire towards me first. I might not be to your liking, but the desire of man is—"

"Shut up. Just shut up already," Tohru said with something like a moan. "Or rather, just take a look at this."

Tohru reached around to his back and lifted his clothing up just a bit. The

wound was visible enough to see the signs of a sewing job.

“This is—”

She seemed to be as surprised as one would expect, as her eyes went wide.

“Do you understand now?”

“Yes. I understand. It seems I’ve made a grave misunderstanding.”

“If you get it, then good. *If* you get it. Oh yeah, since you’ve come all this way, your food is also—”

“This girl.”

Without even hearing Tohru’s words, she fixed her gaze upon Chaika.

“I will kill her.”

“Eeep!?”

Akari determinedly walked towards Chaika, but Tohru leapt up and stopped Akari by twisting her arms behind her back. Right now she didn’t have the hammer; but that didn’t mean he could relax. Akari could crush an apple with her bare hands. It wasn’t like she was particularly muscular, but as she was a member of the Acura clan she was certainly no novice.

“You don’t get it at all, do you!?”

“Of course I do. You were done in by this girl. And since she gave my exalted brother that wound, my gentle, understanding self might not be able to hold back, either.”

“Exactly what part of you is ‘gentle’ and ‘understanding’? And are you respecting me or insulting me? I can never tell!”

Aparrently Akari thought Chaika had given him that wound.

“...Am I mistaken?”

With Tohru still holding her back, Akari turned around and looked at him over her shoulder.

“You are. Definitely.”

“But there is no other way to hurt you than distracting you with your fetish

for young girls."

"Exactly what kind of person do you think I am?"

Tohru groaned.

Then—

"It was a Feyra," he murmured in another language entirely.

If word got out on this side of town that a destructive beast had appeared, it would cause a huge uproar. They would probably say things like, "That guy encountered a beast of destruction and lived to tell the tale? Just what in the world is he?" It would make keeping his family name secret and hiding himself within the refugee district of Del Solant a moot point.

"..."

Akari immediately narrowed her eyes.

"For whatever reason, I met a Feyra. By chance, I happened to meet this girl, Chaika, and I got her to help me defeat it. She's a wizard, and there's a Gundo in that coffin there."

In the town of Acura, there was a code language that only the Acura clan knew of. These words made it so that anyone around them would have no idea what they were talking about, but they also indicated to Akari that this was a serious matter.

"And so this girl's actually my benefactor. It's lunchtime now, but this girl offered to pay for our breakfast in return for me guiding her. We've had enough plants already, so eat up."

"...I see..."

Akari nodded her head.

At the same time Tohru released his hold on her.

"I apologize, dear brother."

"Finally, you understand."

"I had thought that since you'd been out of work and lying around all day, your sexual desire was full to burst—"

“Shut up already.”

He scowled at her.

“Anyway...since you went through the trouble of coming here, we can both get fed. Her treat.”

“Hm?”

Akari looked in Chaika’s direction, and after a long sigh, Chaika nodded.

“I see. Then I’ll have the special of the day, enough for four people.”

“Hey now...”

“When you didn’t come back, I got worried, used my hidden technique, and ended up looking all around town for you. As such, I am quite famished.”

“...Wait, you shouldn’t use the technique like...ah, never mind. Whatever.”

Well, it was true that Akari could also use the “Iron-Blood Transformation” technique.

“Well, sorry, but I guess that’s how it is.”

“...Resignation.”

Chaika nodded.

## Part 2

“...”

The man was standing in front of the Feyra's corpse.

It looked like his entire body was covered in brown and green, but that might have just been the clothing he was wearing. At any rate, he blended into the scenery around him. His head had been shaved completely bald, and he had spread some sort of dye all over it to camouflage it in the same color as his clothes. If he closed his eyes, from a distance it would probably be difficult to recognize him as human.

“Ohh...”

His face contorted.

It was difficult to discern his expression because of all that paint, but in the next moment big tears started to flow down his face.

“Ooooooooh...”

The man dropped to his knees, and clung to the Feyra's corpse as if for dear life. Its remains had been bisected from head to rear as if filleted by an enormous knife. So much blood had poured out from its large, dark body and been absorbed into the ground that this magic-wielding monster who once had the potential to scare an entire nation seemed to be a whole size smaller.

“It must have hurt...You must have suffered so...ooh...oooh...poor thing, poor thing!”

For a while, the man sobbed on top of the Feyra's dead body.

It was as if a member of his own family had been slaughtered.

But then—

“But, it's inconceivable,” the man muttered in a composed tone, as if someone had flipped a switch that had caused his personality to do an about-face. “The unicorn was in this forest and on the offensive, and yet a wizard was able to defeat it. No matter how you look at it, the unicorn had the advantage

here. Against a young girl wizard, carrying her luggage, no less, there should have been no contest."

The man released himself from the unicorn's corpse, stood up, and tilted his head.

"I'd borrowed some 'eyes and ears' in anticipation of setbacks, sure. But could I have overlooked something...?"

The man surveyed the area, and in the next moment, he once again dropped to the ground and roamed about on all fours like a beast.

Narrowing his eyes and sniffing around, he prowled around the Feyra's corpse for a bit, and—

"Was there...someone else besides the target?"

He muttered.

The man's eyes zeroed in on trampled leaves and snapped twigs.

That was most likely the limit of what normal human eyes could see, but—

"Footprints...other than the target's...they appear to be those of an adult male...one set. Oho. Ohoho. It appears we have quite the skilled opponent. But what in the world kind of person was he? But wait, up until now that girl has always been by herself. Did she meet someone here? But then again..."

The man tilted his head.

"I see. As I thought, it seems that acting on my own was poor judgement. If the target had a partner, then certainly, it might have been too much for me to handle alone. Perhaps it would have been best to wait for Gillette-dono's arrival after all..."

The man stood up and turned his head in a certain direction.

"At any rate, it's a safe bet they've arrived at that town by now."

The man continued to stare in that direction.

The direction—of the town of Del Solant.

\*

At the entrance to the diner, Chaika parted ways with the siblings.

They had fought together, yes, but she and Tohru had only been coincidental passing acquaintances to begin with.

Tohru had guided the lost Chaika to Del Solant. Chaika had treated him to some food as a reward. With that, they didn't owe each other anything else. As for the Feyra incident, it wasn't like one of them saved the other one's life since the Feyra hadn't had a specific target.

However...

"Dear brother?"

Akari's voice reached Tohru, and in a panic he turned around to face his sister.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. You keep turning around for some reason."

"Oh, that's..."

Something was strange.

That girl named Chaika Trabant.

Tohru really didn't know why, but there was still something on his mind.

"Does that girl really concern you that much?"

"Ah? Nah—well, I mean, I did think she was pretty strange."

"..."

Akari let out a strange sigh that sounded forced.

Because she didn't express herself very often, it was even more obvious that the sigh was fake. Ever since she'd lived in the village of Acura, she had always been bad at acting, which people had pointed out to her on many occasions. Incidentally, for saboteurs who used hindrance tactics to catch the enemy with their pants down, acting ability was vital enough to practically be another weapon at their disposal.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, just thinking about how my brother is a pervert that gets turned on by

little girls.”

“That again, huh?”

“Oh, but don’t get me wrong,” Akari said with a shake of her head. “Even if you are a pervert, I will never stop cherishing and respecting you.”

“Your ‘respect and affection’ make no damn sense,” Tohru muttered while walking.

It would be a bit later before he’d realize something within him had changed.

\*

With a dull but loud sound, a vehicle continued down the main road.

In these last few years, machines with engines that ran on magical energy had already become prevalent, even among commoners. However, it was still rare to see commoners with vehicles; mostly just the “upper crust” like nobility, royalty and wealthy merchants possessed them. In the long run, vehicles were far more convenient, easier to maintain and cheaper than carriages drawn by horses and oxen, but they were also incredibly expensive. As a result, only a small subset of people could afford one.

They were also quite conspicuous, not to mention that this one was painted a pure white and currently heading down a populated country road.

As it passed by various horse and oxen-driven carriages, it turned the heads of coachmen and passengers alike, who followed it with widened eyes until it was out of sight.

“...We really shouldn’t be traveling in broad daylight.”

Inside the vehicle, a young man spoke with a sigh.

This model of vehicle, named “April”, happened to be quite spacious. However, any passerby could tell from its outward appearance alone that there was more to it than its size; it looked like a small mobile home. Not including the coachman’s cabin from where the April was operated, there were four private rooms, two cargo holds, and a central cabin where all the members of the crew could meet and talk.

The young man was in that cabin. Aside from him, a number of young men

and women were also sitting next to each other at a roundtable.

The color of their hair, eyes, and skin were all over the place, as if there was no sense of unity in the group.

They gave off the impression of a group of mercenaries at first, but the youths simply looked too elegant and refined for that. They looked like a bunch of aristocrats.

“According to the reports from our scout Mattheus, it has to be the girl. If we let her out of our sight again, who knows when we’ll be able to catch her,” said one of them with a shrug.

He was sitting across from the youths; a broad-shouldered, middle-aged man. He was clearly much older than the rest of them, yet he more or less humbled himself towards the young ones, so his social status and position probably didn’t matter here.

“Yet here we are, recklessly standing out.”

“True.”

The middle-aged man gave a bitter smile.

The youth had a point.

If a large white vehicle continuously drove down a country road, of course it would catch the eyes of the public.

“So much for ‘secret mission.’”

“Well, it’s true that a vehicle meant for nobles driving down a country road will, as you say, draw the public eye. But they don’t know why we’re here, or even who we are.”

“I suppose...”

“More importantly...” The middle-aged man turned towards the coachman’s cabin. “Zita, about how long until we arrive in Del Solant?”

“Should be another half hour,” came the voice of a young girl.

“...So she says. The problem is what happens after that, I guess.”

“Have we been in touch with Count Abarth yet?” the voice apparently

belonging to a young girl named Zita replied.

“More or less. Though I didn’t divulge the reason we’re here.”

“That’s just as well,” the middle-aged man muttered. “After all, this probably ain’t a goal we can achieve through normal means.” He made a face like he was chewing on something bitter.

\*

Considering they had been neglected for quite a while, they were still where they had last been left, in the same condition.

In one of the wooden boxes that had been piled up in the house, they were there along with tools for their maintenance, almost as if waiting to be picked up once again

“...”

Tohru took them out of the box with a frown.

They were two small swords that could be attached to a leather belt.

They weren’t as long as longswords or short as shortswords, but somewhere in the middle; their size was such that they conveniently had the advantages of each.

However—

“...”

Placing the two small blades, along with a girdle, on top of one of the nearby wooden boxes, he removed the thin gloves covering both his hands. In case he was seen by anyone other than Akari, he never removed these, even when entering the bath—it was necessary to keep living as a simple commoner. He examined the palms of his hands.

A design with complex markings had been etched onto both palms.

It was the same design as the one on the hilt of each sword.

Wrapping the girdle around his torso once again, he brought his hands near the swords’ hilts.

The swords fit naturally in his hands—it was like he’d never abandoned them

for almost a whole year.

Lightly gripping them, he tested them out.

“Huh...”

It didn’t feel uncomfortable or out-of-place at all.

Rather, he felt like the hatchet he’d used this morning had been much more unwieldy, even though it had been his weapon of choice ever since he first came to Del Solant.

“Could this be...fate or something?” Tohru muttered.

Exactly why he had chosen now to pick up them up again, he couldn’t say. Using them as a replacement for his broken hatchet wouldn’t work as an excuse. Living as an ordinary commoner, there was clearly no need for a weapon like this.

With Akari, she didn’t even blink at using her favored weapon for a bunch of different things, but because it was quite clear that Tohru’s two blades weren’t designed for ceremonial or work purposes, there were no opportunities to use them as long as Del Solant remained peaceful.

Though it was true that Akari rarely even took her own hammer out of the house, since she didn’t normally use it for work...

“Nah.”

Tohru undid his girdle without unsheathing the swords.

He was about to put his once-favored weapon back in the box, but then—  
“...”

His hand stopped.

He stared at the blades for a while, and then he expertly attached them to his leather belt and got the repair tools out of the box, grabbing some powder that kept up a sword’s durability, some oil, and a wooden hammer to remove rivets, among other things. Bundling them all up, he stuffed them in the leather bag on his belt.

Then Tohru went to the next room, where he arranged his swords and the

repair tools on top of an old table that had been neglected for quite some time.

There—

“...Dear brother?”

Akari’s voice came from the open door, as if was just passing by.

“That’s...”

“Huh? Oh. This is...uh...”

Tohru fumbled his words for a bit, and then heaved a sigh.

“Well, you know.”

“...”

Akari entered the room proper and stared at the swords beside Tohru.

“Doing repairs, I see?”

“Well...yeah.”

It wasn’t like he had a specific reason for it.

But—

“I’m not really doing anything else, I guess.”

“...”

He thought she would say, *if that’s the case then shouldn’t you be doing some work?* But for some reason, Akari didn’t say anything. She only gave a small nod, and promptly left the room.

“‘Not doing anything else,’ huh...is this something I want to do, then?”

No. There was nothing like that anymore.

A saboteur could only operate on a battlefield.

It was now a period of peace, and those kind of techniques, no matter if used with a saw, a kitchen knife, or an oddly-sized pair of small swords, no longer had any place.

However...

“...”

What had happened earlier was nothing more than a trivial occurrence.

You couldn't really even call it a "battle."

The encounter with the Feyra in the mountains—he and the wizard girl had coincidentally met, and had killed a Feyra. That was all. It probably wasn't going to happen again. And even if it did, he couldn't guarantee that he'd have the same feelings then.

And yet—

"I—"

It wasn't just using the "Iron-Blood Transformation."

Having barely avoided death's embrace, thrown away all unnecessary thoughts and pushed himself to the limits of his ability, a feeling taken root inside him.

It was—

"Well, I guess this is okay."

What was okay?

Tohru wasn't sure himself, but he began maintenance on the small swords nonetheless.

## Part 3

“Dear brother.”

When he opened his eyes the next morning, his sister’s face was so close to him that he could feel her breath.

It was the same situation as the other day.

And it should also be said that the iron hammer was again eating into his pillow in the same fashion.

“Good morning.”

“...Ugh,” Tohru mumbled. “What the hell are you playing at?”

“You say ‘what am I playing at’, but...”

Akari tilted her head.

The hammer remained sunk into Tohru’s pillow.

“It’s the same as yesterday. I’m here to wake you up.”

“That’s why I’d like to hear why you’re using the same method as yesterday.”

“Because this is the same situation as yesterday.”

“...”

Tohru was at a loss for words.

Sure, thanks to Chaika they had obtained breakfast for yesterday—well, it was basically lunch. But when you thought about it that was only for one day, and since he wasn’t working they were still penniless. Or rather, what little day-to-day income Akari did earn from working at various stores in the neighborhood had all gone to last night’s dinner.

They had both used “Iron-Blood Transformation.” So for not only lunch but also dinner, they ate many times more than a normal human would. As a result, the money that had originally been intended to last them for three more days was spent on a single dinner.

The situation was indeed the same as yesterday morning’s.

“...I haven’t even recovered from my injuries yet.”

“But you can still do simple jobs, no?”

“I thought I told you, I’m not planning to make this “working” thing a habit,” Tohru said with a groan. “Besides, you’re not doing all you can do either. Find some suitable guy and marry him already. If you learn how to fake a smile it’ll probably be all right. And even if you still haven’t had sex, you’ve learned a few techniques and such—”

“But what if the man I married didn’t do any work either? It’d end up the same way.”

“Well, yeah, I guess...”

Tohru didn’t like to brag, but there weren’t many men like him. The postwar period was a “period of chaos”, so to speak, and though everyone was still getting by it was an era of desperation. People like Tohru who said things like “If I work, I lose” in this era would have to be either very eccentric or very stupid.

Basically, it would be like saying “Well, it’s okay if I die.”

“In any case...”

Akari began.

“I’m almost at my limit.”

“Limit?”

“The limit of my patience.”

She said.

In the next instant—

Tohru leapt from the bed.

Akari had thrust her hand forward with vicious speed.

She wasn’t playing around this time. If Tohru hadn’t seriously tried to avoid it, her right hand would most certainly have pierced right through his stomach and out his back.

“—Akari!?”

When he had jumped, Tohru had kicked off of the wall with an unnecessary amount of force, then kicked off the ceiling and landed on the floor. It was a pretty run-down house, so that caused a chorus of creaking and groaning, as if it was protesting being treated so cruelly.

“I think I said it already.”

As she said it, Akari raised up.

“If dear brother refuses to work, then I’d rather he be stuffed.”

“...Seriously?” Tohru groaned.

Akari took out her hammer, but instead of swinging it around like yesterday, she pointed it straight at him. There wasn’t any hint of it being just a meaningless bluff. She was intending to kill.

*Well, I guess she has a point,* Tohru thought despairingly.

As she had said, she had reached the point where her patience had run out. Naturally—after enduring day after day of him lying around the house doing nothing with no future prospects to speak of—rather than having to call that kind of existence “family”, it wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility for her to think that erasing it once and for all and starting afresh would be a better option.

The war had ended, and not much time had elapsed since then.

A human’s life was a trivial thing. The registers for the residents of the town were not kept up, much less those of the refugees. They had no clue who was where. It was for this reason that Tohru and Akari were able to blend in with the commoners so innocently.

At any rate—

“!”

Without warning, Akari’s hammer went flying towards him.

Tohru avoided it—just barely. The attack grazed his head as it passed him, and it went right through a wall that had already looked like it was on its last legs.

Rolling to the floor, he grabbed the belt that was lying on the bed with his swords inside and jumped, evading a second attack. When their eyes met each other once more, Akari had already returned to her original position.

There existed a sword-drawing technique called *iai* where one sheathed their sword after cutting down their opponent, and this was much the same thing. If its user was tired, a hammer would have no strength. A hammer was different from an edged weapon in that when a hammer wasn't moving, it had no destructive force. So in order to use consecutive attacks, either centrifugal force from swinging it around or something like *iai*, which allowed for the constant acceleration of a single strike, was necessary.

*I'm not good against these hammer techniques...*

While thinking that, Tohru slowly stepped back, and, checking if there was some sort of blind spot, equipped the two swords to his waist.

Then, leaping through a hole in the destroyed wall, he made it outside.

Akari followed him.

Perhaps it was due to the noise from the wall being destroyed or something else, but he could see heads poking out of their houses. However, there wasn't anyone capricious enough to want to intervene. Faced with Akari's serious killing intent, no commoner would entertain the notion of jumping into the fight.

"...If you're joking, it's time to knock it off," Tohru said as if delivering an ultimatum. "It isn't funny anymore."

"Nii-sama."

Akari said.

"I have never joked even once in my entire life."

"Wait, is that really true?"

"Of course."

"..."

There were all sorts of things he could have said about that, but he decided to

leave it be for now.

“...No choice, then.”

Tohru prepared himself, gripping the hilts of his swords. As he squeezed them, the etchings on his palm and the etchings on the swords’ hilts became linked. At the same time, he flicked back the snap fastener on their guards and drew them out.

“...Heh.”

The feeling in his hands...no, his legs, had changed in an instant.

Tohru’s favored double blades might not have had a name, but they weren’t just any old blades. They were comblades, which were often used by soldiers on the battlefield. Its hilt and blade were set up so that its user could activate it by using the “key” of the seal on his hand.

In that moment...the comblades literally became a part of Tohru.

When used, they felt completely natural. Even though he was gripping swords to kill the enemy, it was as if they were merely an extension of his hands. As he was now, Tohru could get a read on the feeling of the wind and temperature of the swords like his own skin. He even felt that his arms had extended to resemble swords; there was no longer any sensation of “holding” them.

Then—

“—I am steel.”

Tohru and Akari both muttered it simultaneously.

*“Steel knows no fear. Steel knows no doubt. When faced with my enemy, I hesitate not. I am a weapon to destroy them.”*

The hidden technique, “Iron-Blood Transformation.”

With the chanting of the keywords, both saboteurs’ bodies underwent the optimum changes for them to become weapons.

Tohru became one with the comblades, meaning in that moment he existed only for the purpose of wielding them. He was a part of them. His body had become the comblades.

A blade didn't feel.

A blade wasn't frightened.

With those keywords, his only purpose now was to destroy any and every enemy without hesitation.

In the next moment, Tohru and Akari both simultaneously kicked off of the ground.

However, they didn't leap at each other; they were merely gauging each other's agility. A careless leap into the air could lead to being scooped up by an attack from the ground. It didn't matter how much "Iron-Blood Transformation" they used—there would be no way of avoiding an attack like that while in midair. At the very most, one could change their stance by using their limbs, but they wouldn't be able to avoid an attack aimed at their center of gravity.

Tapping noises hit the ground.

Metal screeched on metal, again and again.

The two saboteurs dropped their upper bodies and ran, almost crawling along the ground. When they met each other, they kicked off the ground mightily, putting all their power into their stretched muscles before releasing.

"Ugh...!"

Tohru groaned.

He was just barely able to avoid her attack.

The hammer had flown towards him from the left, and by crossing his swords he was able to block it. Of course, if he had tried to block the pointed part of the hammer, his blades would have been done for, so Tohru had aimed for the grip of the hammer. When there was centripetal acceleration the hammer's destructive force was at its strongest using its pointed end, so basically, the closer the part was to the user, the weaker it was.

But, that also meant that a rather dangerous opening could be created. A normal human would use the opportunity to pull back and gain some distance, but then they would fall prey to the hammer. Furthermore, the hammer would just continue to attack by accelerating in a circle. Deliberately entering her

space was the only correct option.

Tohru showed no sign of fear or hesitation in his transformed state.

The optimal retooling of his body for battle had even killed his instinct for fear.

However, Akari was the same way.

At once, she drew her hammer back.

Due to that movement, the swords that had been grinding against the hammer's grip were pulled away, and he lost his balance. At the same time, using the recoil from pulling the hammer back, she rotated her body instead of her hammer and gracefully outstretched her legs, sending them, like another hammer, towards Tohru's undefended right and forehead.

“—!”

There was iron in various places in both Tohru and Akari's boots. Fundamentally it was for self-defense, but when that much force was added they could be used as a weapon. Of course, that kick had the weight of her entire body put into it, so if it had been a direct hit Tohru's skull would have caved in—after all, the forehead was the thinnest layer between the cranium.



But, with no regard to his own balance, he invaded Akari's space once more, barreling into her.

He was able to avoid the toe of her boot colliding with his forehead, but her knee smashed into his cheek, and both of them rolled onto the floor, becoming entangled.

"Uuu..."

He immediately pushed Akari aside, rolled away, and sprang up using the force of the roll.

He glanced at her, and saw that she was also getting up.

*She's strong,* Tohru thought unconcernedly.

They had had plenty of skirmishes back in the village of Acura, but up until now they had never fought seriously.

*Her ability is on par with mine. So muscle and endurance alone won't cut it...*

He had shirked his training for a whole year, so his abilities had diminished somewhat. Akari, however, seemed to be even better than before. Not to mention...

*Did my wound open up again?* he thought, as if it was somebody else's problem.

Akari had done a more proper job of sewing up the wound on Tohru's back, but it hadn't had the time to heal completely yet. In everyday life there was usually no danger of straining spinal muscles, but all the leaping and bounding he was doing now was taking its toll.

Even in stamina, Tohru had no chance of victory against Akari.

So—

*It'll be a sudden death match then.*

Preparing his swords, Tohru came to a decision.

If there was one advantage to be had, it was the difference in their weapons. Akari's weapon excelled in destructive power, but its attack patterns were

limited. For its rotation to be effective, all of its movements had to be large and pronounced.

Tohru's weapons, on the other hand, could thrust as well as slash, but far and away their most important advantage over the hammer was that they were light, making them easily maneuverable. Also, since he had two of them, the number of skills he had at his disposal doubled.

If he could make use of that difference, he might be able to turn the tables.

“—!”

Tohru exhaled, then entered the fray.

Kicking off the ground, he glided toward Akari. He put up his left sword like a shield and tightened the right sword under his arm.

Akari's hammer flew towards him.

A sweeping diagonal strike from the ground, meant to scoop up its opponent.

His reach with his left arm was too short, so it was hard to judge an attack that had come from the right. If he used his right sword to defend, Akari would only have to bend her body backwards, fine-tuned her trajectory, and execute a horizontal strike. He wouldn't be able to handle it. Therefore...

“...!”

He immediately crossed his swords, and used them to block as he had before. But this time, he was late in crossing the left sword with the right one. There was no way a half-assed method of guarding like that was going to stop the force of the hammer, so with a shrill sound, the two swords were knocked high into the air.

“...”

Akari's gaze went straight to the swords in an instant.

But the hammer kept on its path, undisturbed, straight towards Tohru's side. If it turned out to be a direct hit here, a vital organ like his kidneys or something could be destroyed. It probably wouldn't be instant death, but a few days later it would definitely prove fatal.

But—

“Heh.”

Tohru reached out.

For the hammer itself.

Akari opened her eyes wide in surprise.

Tohru and Akari had both been taught how to catch a blade between their hands. However, that was a technique meant for a sword, not a hammer. A hammer’s centrifugal force was much too great, so Tohru catching a hammer between his bare hands was completely out of the question. If he did a poor job of it, the hammer would slip right through his hands and score a direct hit. And even if he did manage to stop the attack, his arm joints would be damaged and he wouldn’t be able to deal with the next attack at all.

But—

“...”

Tohru just caught the hammer. Well, just for clarity’s sake, when he grabbed hold of it he had jumped backwards in the same direction the hammer was traveling. After the hammer had already bounced off the swords and had its momentum reduced somewhat, the pointed end of the hammer was much easier to take hold of.

So Tohru didn’t end up stopping the attack, but since he had jumped to match it, the force the hammer had was close to zero, relatively speaking. In fact, because he had done so, Tohru’s own body weight was acting as a momentum killer.

And so—

“...Ku!”

Letting out a short breath, Akari let go of the hammer.

In this situation, continuing to hold it would be more disadvantageous.

But—it was already too late.

She and the hammer thrust forward into the air, but Tohru twisted his body

and hooked his leg into Akari's long hair.

"Ah!"

He pulled his leg downward and dragged Akari down to the floor.

With the hammer now in his possession, Tohru switched the hand holding it and thrust it forward at Akari's temporal lobe.

"Had enough?"

Tohru glared at his sister, who was crawling around on the ground as if entangled.

The hammer was Akari's favored weapon, just as small swords were Tohru's. Akari was the only one that could wield it with maximum efficiency, but no matter who wielded it, its weight and the sharpness of its pointed end remained unchanged. If Tohru felt like doing so, a blow to Akari's temple would definitely kill her.

However...

"I'll ask you again. Are you serious about fighting like this?"

"...Of course I'm serious."

Akari said without any trace of timidity.

Then—

"OK, that'll be enough!"

A sound like someone clapping their hands together reached Tohru's ears.

Tohru stepped away from Akari and threw the hammer to the ground. He turned to face where the sound was coming from.

It was—

"...!?"

Two people he recognized stood next to each other.

One of them was—

"You..."

Tohru briefly chanted the keywords that released him from his “Iron-Blood Transformation” state, and ended his battle.

There, standing in front of him, was an elderly man.

Small and thin, the man looked neurotic. He belonged to the guild. Tohru had seen him before when he had been dragged by Akari to join, so he recognized him. He was pretty sure his surname was Barton. His first name, he didn’t remember.

“Enough, enough. Well now, I’m surprised. I didn’t think you’d be able to stop yourself after going that fast—”

“What’s going on?” Tohru asked as he furrowed his brows.

“Never mind. Tohru, I am a representative of the guild here, and I must inform you that we are considering your expulsion,” Barton said. “You see, people who are only a name on a list lose credence within the guild.”

He was basically saying that people like Tohru who registered for the guild but didn’t take any jobs were like dead weight.

Well, it was a completely respectable idea.

Even Tohru had no reason to raise any objections.

But—

“So, if you turn down this last mission, your expulsion will be imminent. However, this mission might be a tough one...”

“...?”

“Ah, well, all I heard from the client was that it’s a difficult job, or rather I should say its terms are strict. So we thought it’d be best to check to see if you had the ability to do it.”

“...Wait, for starters, there should be all kinds of registered people in the guild,” Tohru said, frowning. “Putting aside my talents, there should be plenty of others who—”

“No. The truth is, the client specified you as the first candidate of choice.”

Barton indicated the figure beside him.

It was a petite girl with silver hair.

It was Chaika.

“And so—well, actually, we wanted to ascertain what sort of abilities you had. So we asked your sister here for some help.”

“...”

Tohru got up, turned around, and glared at his sister.

But of course she was not in the least bit intimidated, and returned his gaze coolly.

“Were you not serious?”

“Of course I was. I am always serious.”

Akari clenched her fist tightly and nodded.

“This may have been a farce, but me wanting to stuff you is no falsehood!”

“Don’t say that so matter-of-factly!” Tohru shouted, and then let out a long sigh. “Ah, shit. Guess I gotta work, then.”

He had never thought about taking any path other than a saboteur’s.

And he thought the same way even now.

He just wouldn’t be good with anything else.

But...

Is she offering me work?

Tohru turned to look at Chaika.

With a big nod, Chaika said—

“Employment. Employment. You both, capable.”

Looking triumphant for some reason, Chaika pointed at both Tohru and Akari.

“Akari too? Wait, what in the world kind of job is it?”

Barton and the others in the guild probably didn’t know from the powers they displayed that Tohru and Akari were saboteurs.

But Chaika knew Tohru was one.

And while people like saboteurs were godsends when it came to war, they were useless in this era of peace. Their skill in battle was high, but there were many kinds of battle abilities. A saboteur's brand of deception was limited in where it could be used. For instance, in the case of a guard at a shop or the guards to the city, strength would be more desirable. Guarding a rich person was the same—they would prefer a group of people that were trained in proper, refined martial arts.

To be blunt, saboteurs were the handymen of the battlefield, specializing in winning battles by using anything and everything that was at their disposal. They weren't known for wiping large swaths of people out, but they were known for using less-than-savory ways to get their jobs done, which often made them hated.

"Discussion," Chaika said with another large nod.

"Well then, it looks like you have a lot to talk about. I'll be off, then," Barton said, looking satisfied. He walked out, leaving Tohru and the others behind. It didn't seem to matter to him exactly where they were going; for better or worse, this man's work was simply finding the right people and dispatching them. Most likely he had already received his monetary compensation from Chaika.

"...Why me?"

"Mm..."

Chaika tilted her head slightly, and then spoke.

"Fate?"

"Fate, huh..."

That was a rather vague thing.

But—

Perhaps she also felt something from yesterday's events.

Walking a tightrope between life and death.

In that moment, he had felt a sense of fulfillment—and also...

“—Brother.”

Akari’s urging voice came back to him.

Tohru made a sour face and—

“Okay, okay, I get it. By specifying me and Akari, that must mean you don’t want someone like a cleaning lady or a farmer, right?”

“Yes.”

Chaika nodded.

“Want, saboteurs,” she said clearly.

## Part 4

The residence of Count Abarth was a lord's mansion located in the center of the fort town of Del Solant.

The Abarths had a military background, and as a result he had many subordinates and all sorts of knights at his disposal. The end of the long campaign of the warring era—in other words, when the Gaz Empire of the north was obliterated—owed a lot to the present head of the family, Roberto Abarth, who had played a large role in the Gaz Empire's demise and was often called a hero as a result.

It was said that nowadays he devoted himself solely to calling over engineers specializing in magic for the restoration of Del Solant and expanding the influence of the Abarths. Originally they should have been nothing more than a group of rural nobles, but their pedigree was such that they were a hot topic even within the Couvre Empire.

“Dearest guests, welcome to my humble abode.”

Inside a vehicle named “April”, there were several people. They had traveled to Del Solant to visit his estate, so Roberto Abarth himself came out to greet them at his doorstep with an amicable, charming smile.

The April belonged to Alberic Gillette, a knight who represented his home of the kingdom of Vemac while traveling incognito to Del Solant under the pretext of “martial arts training”—at least, that was the story the Abarths came up with.

In other words, the Abarths believed that this could turn into an opportunity to form a secret alliance with neighboring nobles, useful for expanding their influence within the kingdom.

“I am Roberto Abarth.”

Said the blond-haired man with all the makings of a hero as he bowed.

He definitely looked like a noble—his sophisticated and well-groomed face sat atop a lean, well-toned body with broad shoulders. Though physically both

Roberto and Alberic had the appearance of nobility, Alberic gave off the sense of being somewhat plain when compared to Roberto—Alberic's unrefined nature made it seem like he was from a military family.

On the other hand, Roberto, the one lauded with the title of "hero", looked flashy, almost to the point of discomfort. His garments were laced with plenty of gold and silver thread, and incorporated the Abarth family crest as a design—from head to toe he looked extravagant; much closer to royalty than nobility.

"I am Alberic Gillette," Alberic said, returning the bow.

Accompanying him from the rear were two people that seemed to act as his attendants, named Zita and Vivi, two unintimidating teenage girls. Among the personnel inside the April, this pair looked the most harmless, but Alberic chose them precisely because they wouldn't seem threatening to any important people he met with. Of course, when Alberic made his visits he often ended up giving others the impression that the girls were his "special servants", but there was no helping that.

Both Alberic and his two female attendants followed Roberto towards the parlor.

Passing by a seemingly endless number of works of art lined up in the corridor on the way, Alberic began to study the current head of the Abarth family's nature.

*It's pretty clear that this guy craves the limelight.*

The works of art were things like paintings depicting Roberto himself smiling and many sculptures based on his image. Sculptures of historic heroes and famous paintings also lined the corridor, which gave the impression that the value Roberto put on himself was equal to that of the heroes and paintings.

*But...did he really come from a military family? Is he really a hero?*

Alberic was also a knight. By observing the way Roberto walked—not to mention his appearance from behind—Alberic was able to grasp a sense of his true ability. His movements were...well, he didn't get the feeling he was well-versed in martial arts. Actually, they were closer to that of a complete amateur.

However, there was no doubt that in the last war Roberto had been named a

“hero”.

If that wasn’t the case, Alberic and company wouldn’t have visited his estate to begin with.

*Perhaps it’s just that his ability dulled over the five years...?*

He was the region’s feudal lord, and he had been crowned with the title of “hero”. Now, he seemed fine with the idea of not forging his body further or accumulating any more deeds of arms.

“Please, come in.”

Roberto invited the three of them into the lavishly-decorated parlor and sat down on the cushy-looking sofa.

They dispensed with the standard few obligatory pleasantries that were exchanged when nobles talked with other nobles.

But then—

“Now then. What’s your objective behind visiting the estate of the great Count Abarth?”

“...”

In that instant, Alberic hesitated over how exactly to begin.

Normally, nobility and royalty inviting Alberic’s group in were amicable up to this point.

But even so, he spoke—

“Count Abarth. While I am aware that such an impromptu visit exceeds the limits of propriety...I have something to ask of you.”

“Oh?”

Roberto blinked.

“I would like to borrow something from you may have unofficially obtained from the imperial capital of the Gaz Empire.”

“...What?”

Roberto’s eyebrows went up.

It was a natural reaction. In an instant his demeanor changed from that of welcoming a guest to being cautious of an opponent.

“You want to borrow *that*?”

Roberto didn’t even ask what it was he wanted to borrow.

Truthfully, Alberic and the others originally had no idea whether or not Roberto actually had what they were looking for, but now there was no doubt.

“It is as you say. I can’t divulge the details, but we of the kingdom of Vemac are currently in the process of accomplishing something rather special, thanks to the efforts of the post-war reconstruction agency Kleeman, which cooperates with and builds up various regions.”

“...”

Roberto’s eyes narrowed, looking at Alberic, and then behind him to the two girls, Zita and Vivi, who were standing in the back, partially obscured by the sofa.

“The Couvre Empire is also affiliated with the Kleeman organization. Therefore, if you’d rather think of this as a request not from us but the emperor of Couvre, that would be fine.”

“If you’re telling the whole truth,” said Roberto. “Why do you all want it?”

“That I cannot disclose,” replied Alberic. “The conditions of our special goal deem it necessary that I not answer.”

Roberto screwed up his face, glaring hard at Alberic and the girls.

Then—

“You.”

He rose from the sofa and issued a command to his one of his maids, who were stationed around the edge of the room.

“Our guests will now be leaving. Please show them to the front door with the utmost courtesy.”

“...”

Alberic gave a deep sigh, and stood up.

This was pretty much what he had expected. If you thought about it normally, what Alberic was asking for was very strange. He might as well have been asking someone he had never met before to hand over a family heirloom.

“Count Abarth.”

As he was being shown to the parlor entrance, Alberic turned back and spoke.

“Naturally, I understand why you would not want to hand it over. But this is a matter that threatens the peace of the entire continent of Verbist.”

“...”

Roberto didn’t reply.

He merely fixed his blue eyes on Alberic and the others silently.

Alberic sighed, and left the parlor behind.

\*

It was roughly half an hour after Tohru and Akari’s “fight”—the examination to determine Tohru’s true strength.

Inside their ruined house, Chaika had explained the mission they were being hired to take on.

Which was—

“True heart?”

“True heart.” (1)

Chaika affirmed and nodded, like it was completely obvious.

She seemed to have an unexplainable amount of self-confidence, but—

“No matter how you put it, that’s impossible.”

“Not impossible.”

Chaika shook her head, her long, silver hair fluttering about.

“Necessary. At any cost. If so, is possible.”

Tohru and Akari looked at each other.

Naturally, even Akari seemed to be surprised at what this request turned out

to be. Perhaps Barton had already known the gist of it, and that was why he had been so quick to dismiss it with only “this matter is unrelated to the guild,” and left without even hearing a little bit of the details.

However—

“Feudal lord’s house, will attack.”

Chaika said decisively.

“Then, take it back.”

“Take what back?”

“Very important, thing,” said Chaika after a moment of hesitation.

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#### TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

1. This is literally what Chaika says. There just wasn’t a better way to put it in Chaika-ese. The point is, they’re being asked to do something that requires their full dedication because it’s something way above the requests the guild normally issues.

# Chapter 3: Blueness of Dragoon Cavalier

## Part 1

For now, Tohru thought it best to feign an astonished expression and tone of voice.

“This place is...?”

Acting wasn’t one of Tohru’s specialties, but he could at least handle this. Tohru’s group were mere passerby cornered by Feyra while trying to escape the forest, and Dominica had rescued them from a precarious situation—or at least, that’s what Tohru wanted her to believe.

“Surprised? Well, when you’re used to it, it’s of no consequence.” She turned to him, showing him a bright smile. She seemed to have bought into his improvisation.

“Troublesome as it is, I do have a duty to that town.”

There was a solitary mansion in front of them.

For a countess’s mansion, there wasn’t really much to it...the scale was considerably smaller than usual. During the long period of wars, the majority of count’s estates were fortified to withstand combat. Actually, it was more like the town itself was just an extension of the estate, and the townspeople just happened to be sandwiched in the space between their walls.

But Dominica Scoda’s estate was different.

There were no outer or inner walls; not even a moat. It was completely and recklessly defenseless; it really was nothing more than a building built in the middle of a secluded forest.

But thinking about it...maybe there was no need for defense. The forest itself was basically its “walls” and “moat.” Tohru knew from his experience with the orthrus that if anyone were to tread carelessly in this forest, like a half-cocked infantry setup, they would surely be annihilated. The very fact that this was the stomping ground of a dragoon cavalier probably also contributed to the fact

that other Feyra didn't dare go near. That in itself was like an invisible layer of protection.

*Difficult to get in and out of, huh. That means I really need to consider our method of escape.*

Tohru continued to think, looking around at the surrounding forest, when—

“Nii-sama,” Akari whispered. He looked to where Akari was pointing, and his eyes narrowed.

The form of Dominica ahead of them was wavering.

The silver-armored figure, enveloped in a blue-white magical light, slowly began to crumble. Outlines became hazy, almost like they were melting into the environment, and her upper body began to morph. Once it was done, her attire had transformed into a simple set of flaxen clothing.

*So that's...the magic of a dragoon...*

He had heard about it before, but this was his first time witnessing it for himself.

“I don't have any subordinates living with me. It's rather quaint, so for that I apologize.”

Opening the door to the foyer, Dominica invited them in, but then she stopped, regarding them with furrowed brows when she saw Chaika's eyes, which were as big as saucers, and Tohru's surprised expression that he deliberately left unconcealed.

“Something the matter?”

“It's just...a bit of a shock, is all,” Tohru spoke up for the whole party.

“Well, the location aside, this shouldn't be too unusual a mansion...”

“No, not that...”

“Transformation, surprising,” Chaika chimed in.

At long last, she seemed to finally realize.

“Hm? Ah, that, right.” She nodded like she understood. “Yes, forgive me, I wasn't thinking. I completely forgot how that looks.”

To her, that change of clothes just now was probably the most inconsequential of actions. Far from being proud of it, it was likely as second-nature to her as taking off her coat when she entered her home.

“So sorry to shock you like that. Normally, it’s just me living here, so...I tend to forget how using my magic appears to other people.” She smiled wryly.

The atmosphere in the mansion itself was chilly; and dead silent, too: there was no sign of anyone else being in it. If you didn’t know any better, you could easily mistake the building for being abandoned. It appeared she was telling the truth...she really was the only one living here, no servants to speak of.

“No, I’m grateful that you rescued me...and even went as far as to shelter me in your own home.” Tohru faked a subservient demeanor.

Yet inside, his mind was geared towards battle. *Now, how should we attack?*

This Dominica might possess one of the remains, which was to say there was a possibility that Tohru’s group would end up fighting her in order to take them from her. But for a dragoon cavalier equipped with such overwhelmingly impregnable defense, a surprise attack was the most viable tactic. An all-out attack before she had a chance to take out her claws—with that, they might be able to get a jump on their opponent. In that case, it would be most preferable for her to have not noticed their presence at all.

Yet they had already been seen, so their methods of surprise attack at this juncture were severely limited.

*Perhaps she has some kind of weak point?*

There were many different kinds of ways to take the enemy by surprise. There was waiting for an opportunity for an opponent to show a blind spot, and attacking a psychological weak point wasn’t out of the question either. In this case, it might be possible that they could cozy up to her now and then assassinate her in her sleep.

For a saboteur, there was no such thing as “dirty” or “unfair.” If it was for the sake of the mission, they would gladly discard their pride. That was their strength.

“Tohru, Tohru.”

As he was investigating the possible options, he felt a tug at his sleeve. It was Chaika.

“Lucky. Good night’s sleep,” she said, looking positively delighted. But Tohru gave her a frown just slight enough that Dominica wouldn’t notice, and whispered in the simple-minded girl’s ear.

“...What do you think you’re doing?”

“Mui?”

“How you can be so nonchalantly overjoyed? Don’t you remember your objective,

*Chaika Trabant*

?” Tohru asked her, trying his utmost to keep his volume down so that Dominica wouldn’t catch on.

“...Mui?”

“I’m talking about the possibility that that dragoon cavalier has one of the pieces of the remains! You do understand that in this situation our chances of taking her by surprise have been ruined, right? It’s like we’re smack dab in the middle of enemy territory!”

“...Ah.” Chaika struck her open left palm with her right fist with a ‘pon’ sound and nodded.

“Remember. Of course, remember. Forget, no way.”

“You completely forgot, didn’t you.”

Even as he was saying it he couldn’t believe it.

Of course, for a while now they had been operating on an extremely strict schedule and hadn’t had time to get a proper night’s sleep in an actual room, so it wasn’t like Tohru didn’t understand Chaika’s elation at the prospect of being able to sleep soundly for one night. Out of the towns they had been to, the one time they had managed to secure lodgings, they had spotted Gillette’s crew and had to hightail it out of there.

“But, Tohru.”

“What?”

“Tohru said. Negotiations, possible.”

“...Ah.” Tohru let out an idiotic grunt.

Yes, indeed. He had previously mentioned to Chaika they didn’t necessarily need to take the remains by force.

Truthfully, ever since he had witnessed Dominica chasing away the orthrus without even unsheathing her sword, Tohru, in very Tohru-like fashion, had probably unconsciously become overtaken with thoughts of how he was to take down the strong opponent in front of him. As a rule, saboteurs weren’t supposed to be choosy about their methods to achieve their goals, nor was it good for them to confine themselves to one line of thinking. In that respect, it seemed Tohru still had a ways to go.

“You completely forgot, didn’t you.”

Chaika cleverly parroted Tohru’s own words back at him.

“Oh, so you’re completely fluent at times like these, huh!?”

“Ouch, ouch, abuse, prohibited!” Chaika yelped as Tohru’s fists ground into the temples of her forehead.

“Indeed, Nii-sama,” Akari cut in. “The only one allowed to abuse you or be abused by you is me.”

“Now what are you on about?”

“Oh, just talking about how you’re tossing aside your sister to engage in skinship with a total stranger,” she said without a hint of emotion. She certainly seemed indignant, and yet since she was a girl whose emotions never came to the forefront, or rather, even if they did they were very slight, it was hard to tell.

“Talk about the height of disgrace. My pride as your younger sister has been gravely wounded. I demand an apology, as well as compensation.”

“Your idea of pride’s a complete mystery. Wait, what do you mean by ‘apology and compensation’?”

“Well, for starters you could whisper ‘Don’t be stupid, you’re the only one for me, Akari’ in my ear, and then there’d be passionate touching, accompanied by ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’; thumps and bumps.”

Such a bold-faced, serious statement, and yet when she said it in that boring monotone as if she was reading off a script, it was just unsettling.

“Neither one of those things is an apology or compensation, you know.” Tohru glared at his sister-by-obligation through half-lidded eyes.

Just then, Dominica turned to face them—

“By the way, how are you all related?” she asked.

“...”

Tohru’s group exchanged glances.

“You don’t seem like merchants...well, no merchants would come this far into the forest anyway.”

Come to think of it, since this encounter with Dominica had been so sudden, they hadn’t had time to come up with a “setting.” Well, actually on the way here Tohru had thought up several scenarios, but he hadn’t had the opportunity to relay any of them to Chaika or Akari.

*What to do?*

They had come to a forest that the locals considered dangerous enough to not set foot in. Just that point alone was abnormal. Excuses like “Well, we were just passing by” or “We got lost” probably wouldn’t cut it. As for them being armed, it wasn’t too unusual to bring weapons into a remote region for defensive purposes, so even if she caught sight of those he could probably talk his way out of it—

“Actually...”

It was Akari that answered the question.

Though she clearly caught sight of Tohru’s surprised expression, she returned it with a stony averting of her eyes and continued.

“We’re siblings.”

“Well, I can tell that much.”

Earlier when they hadn’t been trying to conceal their voices, Akari had called Tohru “Nii-sama” plain and simple, so of course.

Then Akari said,

“We are actually blood-related siblings, and yet we’ve become hopelessly entangled in a forbidden love.”

An off-the-wall statement, yet she announced it grandly.

“Wait—!?”

Tohru’s face blanched, but Akari seemed to pay it no mind—she just continued on in her monotone script-read voice.

“But though there was no way our parents and the rest of our family would accept something so illicit, no one could extinguish the flames of our burning love. The flames had spread too far. They crackle, they burn.”

The words seemed to flow from her mouth like a waterfall, and yet she remained as expressive as a stone.

This tale of forbidden love had even gotten Chaika staring wide-eyed at her; however she continued on unaffected.

“Though we knew we would be eternally joined together in death eventually, deep down we realized the better option. We decided to elope from that place, hand in hand, and so in order to dissuade our family from pursuing us, we deliberately came to this dangerous forest.”

“...I see.”

Dominica stopped walking. She didn’t just look over her shoulder at them; she turned her entire body around to face them fully. Her eyes narrowed, and Tohru felt as if she was seeing straight through them.

*You idiot, what’s with that ridiculous bullshit out of nowhere!?*

Tohru mouthed to Akari with the slightest lip movement he could muster.

*It has persuasive power,*

she mouthed back. She looked proud, of all things.

*There's absolutely nothing strange about a pair of siblings eloping in the throes of forbidden love to come to this forest on a forced march.*



*It's completely strange! And how are you able to come up with this shit off the*

*top of your head, anyway?*

*This is actually all taken from an ever-evolving draft of my ongoing work, "Passion."*

*When did you start writing that!?*

Or rather, Tohru had never known Akari to have such a hobby.

*I've already got up to 30 volumes in the final draft stage.*

*That long!? No, never mind that! She's definitely going to find the scenario suspicious!*

Even under normal circumstances it was going to be next to impossible to get the jump on her, and now with this, she would be on guard for sure. Things had gone from bad to worse for such a pointless reason. Just as he was thinking of some way to backpedal, some way to explain to her that his sister was delusional—

“...I see. That’s how it is, huh?”

Then...Dominica gave a big nod, as if she had been deeply moved.

“...Uh, what?” Tohru froze. His eyes widened despite himself.

But Dominica continued to nod over and over again, saying, “It must have been hard for you two...” She sounded earnest.

“No, uh...”

“You may rest easy. I won’t be so callous as to blow the whistle on your love. It is what it is.”

Against all expectations, it seemed that Dominica had completely bought into Akari’s nonsense. She hadn’t even doubted it for a second; in fact, she spoke reassuringly, almost encouraging.

“Until you’ve gotten rid of your pursuers, feel free to think of this as your own home.”

“Um...th-thank you...very much.” Tohru thought it best to bow his head here.

Although he couldn’t think of a more undesirable outcome, there was no longer any other option but to go along with Akari’s fantasies.

However...

“But, if that’s the case...” Dominica’s gaze shot over to the surprised Chaika, as if to imply one part of the story just didn’t add up. “Who is this girl, then?”

“Ah, she’s...”

Giving Dominica an ambiguous smile, he gave Akari a nudge with his elbow.

*What about Chaika? What’s her story?*

Indeed. The problem was Chaika.

The story of two siblings having eloped in the name of love, abandoning their friends, family, and hometown in the process, had worked, but sticking with this scenario of course meant that Chaika was now unaccounted for, or rather, her existence in this setting was unnatural. Tohru really doubted that a cover-up like “actually, she’s another one of my sisters” would fly here.

*Hmm. That is a problem.* Akari made a face.

*My story is only a chronicle of the “oohs” and “aahs” between brother and sister. It does not allow for the inclusion of any extraneous supporting characters.*

*Sounds like the worst work ever written, then.*

Once Tohru was done mouthing his reply to Akari...he turned to Dominica once more and spoke.

“We humbly ask for your consideration here. This girl has also been chased away from her hometown.”

Rather than making up some huge tale, he determined that divulging her actual circumstances was the best option here.

In other words, the truth, but not the whole truth.

“Our paths fatefully aligned, and we ended up traveling together.”

“...I see.”

Dominica glanced over at Chaika, as well as the coffin which the girl so dutifully carried around, and nodded.

“Everyone has their circumstances...and there are also circumstances that people aren’t comfortable with divulging to complete strangers.”

“I am relieved that you understand.” Tohru bowed his head.

Well, without knowing any details, the sight of “a girl walking around carrying a coffin” just wasn’t normal, no matter how you look at it. It seemed that Dominica had gone ahead and filled in the blanks with some complex, hesitant-to-announce-publicly circumstances of her own surmising. For better or worse, hearing Akari’s earlier delusional novel setting had probably left plenty to the imagination.

Regardless, it seemed it had now become a situation where they had to continue acting out “The Tale of The Siblings’ Forbidden Love (Plus 1 Extra)”.

*Nii-sama.*

Akari looked proud for some reason.

*What is it?*

*This was an inevitable conclusion.*

*Shut up!*

Tohru felt supremely dissatisfied at not being able to shout at her at full volume.

## Part 2

Inside their April-model vehicle, the six members of Gillette Corps were all gathered. They were bound for Ratison.

Officially, the corps moved with Alberic Gillette at the helm, and the Kleeman organization had given Alberic full rein to decide its where and how it operated. That was to say, Alberic was at liberty to decide how to handle the majority of the directives issued to him by headquarters. It was set up so that his fellow corps members were his subordinates, serving only as extra limbs where his own could not reach.

But when it came to his unit, Alberic detested playing the dictator.

Of course, if it came down to it he wouldn't hesitate to order his unit around, however, when new development surrounding or pertaining to the objective arose, he preferred to call meetings and let everyone have their say. From a societal perspective he still considered himself green and lacking in experience, so he valued the varied opinions his team, a unit full of people from all different walks of life, brought to the table.

At first, there actually were a few members of his team that denounced this method, calling it "very un-leader-like" (like Vivi, for instance), but now the entire corps accepted his method of leadership.

"...So..." Alberic's second-in-command Nikolay began, his gaze falling on the documents lying atop their roundtable. By the way, the wounds he had received in his battle with the young saboteur the other day were still healing, so his already massive arm was still wrapped in thick, white bandages. It now resembled a tree trunk even more than before. "What's bothering you?"

Sitting around the table clockwise, starting from Alberic, were Vivi, Zita, Nikolay, and then Leonardo. Mattheus was in the driver's seat, in charge of operating the April vehicle, yet he was close enough that he could still participate in the conversation.

"I just feel like there are too many unknowns," Alberic said. "Our objective is to capture the Taboo Emperor Arthur Gaz's offspring Chaika Gaz, and in the

process secure the remains that she's trying to collect. However," he pointed to the documents from headquarters on the table, "there's almost no information pertaining to the girl."

This sheaf of documents was a bit thicker than the ones he had been given just before he had accepted the mission, though that added thickness could be attributed mostly to the lengthy arrest records of all the fakes calling themselves "Chaika Gaz." Information on Chaika Gaz herself was just about as scant as before.

"Why have so many fakes come out of the woodwork to impersonate her anyway?"

"Well, that's..." he trailed off.

"Yes, what of that?" Nikolay agreed with a nod.

Calling yourself Chaika Gaz and preaching about the second coming of the empire was indeed one way to carry out a moneymaking scheme. That in itself was not unusual. But there had been way too many impostors. To be honest, even before they started hunting down this particular Chaika Gaz, Gillette Corps had already taken two goons claiming they were "the Taboo Emperor's daughter" into custody.

If extorting money was their only goal, there were a number of others they could impersonate instead. As a matter of fact, having the name "Chaika Gaz" would actually be quite risky for business.

"Well, not having enough information is only one of our main problems," said the girl with magnificently wavy hair, Vivi.

Despite the refined, noble impression her outward appearance gave, she was as assassin. She was unwilling to disclose what kind of life she led before joining the corps, and yet...

"I'm Chaika Gaz."

She said, producing a silver wig from somewhere and plopping it on her head. Then, she clasped both hands together as if in prayer.

"In accordance with Father's dying wish, I will strive my hardest to resurrect

the Gaz Empire. Please lend me money, mister.”

“Wahahaha!”

“Ahahaha!”

Nikolay and Zita both broke into explosive laughter, pointing at her. Alberic and Leonardo cracked small, strained smiles.

“Just kidding~”

Removing the silver wig, Vivi stuck out her tongue impishly and continued speaking.

“Since no one knows if she really exists or not, that makes it all the more easy to falsify her appearance. Deceiving and scamming people would a snap...all you need are the traits ‘girl’ and ‘silver hair.’”

For an assassin, proficiency in theater and disguise were indispensable. If Vivi was so inclined, she probably really could fool anyone with her “Chaika Gaz” act.

“That’s true...” said Alberic. “But on the other hand, it’s also true that out of the ones we’ve been after, there were also those that didn’t seem to be pulling any kind of scam at all...this current Chaika Gaz included.”

“You’re talking about the refugees of the Empire trying to make a new ‘leader,’ right?” Nikolay said, wiping away the tears that had formed in his eyes as a result of his boisterous laugh.

“Yes, there were indeed some Chaika Gaz impostors with that in mind, however...”

Alberic reached out for the documents. On the topmost page was a list of all the confirmed Chaika Gaz sightings up until now.

The number totaled over thirty., and seventy percent of those had already been arrested. As previously mentioned, the girls had mostly been selfish individuals trying to make a quick buck...but the problem was that there were three “Chaika Gaz”s that were not.

Those three girls...had all committed suicide after their capture.

From the existence of wizards like Mattheus who specialized in controlling the will of Feyra, Alberic knew that it was possible to forcibly extract information out of a human left alive. Those three girls had most likely taken their own lives because they were afraid of that very fact.

In other words, they had a secret that they were willing to take to the grave.

Alberic and the others suspected that it was information pertaining to the refugee army.

And so, the reason why Gillette Corps were going to such lengths to chase after “Chaika Gaz” was to nip in the bud any societal unrest, indiscriminate slaughter or rebellious insurrections that the Empire refugees might bring forth. Though they were refugees now, they had once been a part of a gigantic major power. If they were to all mobilize, they had more than enough personnel to overtake a small country.

Therefore, Alberic and the others had also surmised that for the realization of that express purpose, hoisting up a new leader and gaining power through the acquisition of Gaz’s remains were perfectly natural courses of action.

But...

“Mattheus.”

“Yes?”

Seemingly surprised at being suddenly called upon, Mattheus twisted his head back to look at them from the driver’s seat.

“You were on their tail for a while. During that time, was there any indication that our current Chaika Gaz was engaging in contact with any refugees or allies of the Empire?”

“No, there were none,” said Mattheus as he rubbed his bald head with his palm. He had been on reconnaissance, previously tailing the Chaika Gaz that Gillette Corps had met in Del Solant. In actuality it had lasted just a bit over three days, but regardless he was the one in the group that had observed the girl’s actions the most. “As far as I could tell, she acted alone the whole time.”

“And then she went and recruited that saboteur,” said Nikolai, nodding.

After investigating, they found out that this Chaika Gaz had put in a request to the Del Solant guild, recruited siblings named Tohru and Akari, and had raided Count Abarth's mansion. The young man who Nikolay had fought with was probably Tohru.

But...if that girl really was being put up by the refugee army as their new leader, they really didn't have a good handle on her, or rather, being left to her own devices to loiter around the continent as she liked didn't really fit the definition of "leader." There should have been someone watching her, or guarding her, or even someone by her side.

"Which means that she really didn't have anyone supporting her? No one at all?"

"If that's so..." Alberic flicked the documents with his index finger, "then who in the world is this girl? Could she be the real thing? Or maybe..."

"Not a swindler, nor a refugee of the Empire...a third type of Chaika Gaz, then?" muttered Zita, tilting her head.

"Her being the genuine article or not, the real problem is what her goal is," Leonardo spoke up. "Well, if she is the real deal, though, she may actually just be trying to give her father a proper burial."

"We certainly can't discount that possibility, either."

The figure of the girl he had seen at Del Solant flashed through his mind.

In some respects, she had had this ephemeral air about her. Nor did she seem like the scheming type in any way. Of course, that all could also be part of her act, though—

"We can't lose sight of the fact that there could be some other motive, as well. Like someone could be using her, and she simply hasn't realized it—something like that. If that's true, we can't let her users do as they please. Like for instance, that poor cute girl's own servants."

"..."

"They'll use whatever they can to achieve their goal, so...huh? What's the matter, everyone?"

Alberic noticed that everyone's gazes from all around the table, save for Mattheus who was preoccupied with driving, had all fixed on a singular point: him. No, he was the one talking, and of course he was their leader, so naturally they would be focused on him. But...how to phrase it...he felt like the intensity of their gazes was a bit different than usual.

"Uh...what did I say?"

Nikolay spoke up first, scratching his cheek.

"Out of all the "Chaika Gaz"s thus far, you seem a bit...attached to this one."

"Attached?" R-really now?" Alberic tilted his head.

It was true that he felt something different about this Chaika versus all the previous ones.

But...then.

"Vivi?"

For some reason, Vivi had taken out the silver wig again, and was now stabbing it hatefully with a needle she had taken out with her bag. Witnessing his subordinate do something so odd, Alberic was perplexed.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing in particular."

With a sulky look, Vivi tossed the wig in the air. She probably wasn't aiming for him, but the wig landed on Mattheus's bald head, and since the needle was still lodged in there, Mattheus let out a sharp cry.

"Ouch!?"

"Well, I mean, you *are* her Gillette-sama—"

"Towards you, Vivi feels pure—"

Nikolay and Zita both opened their mouths to speak, and in the next instant...

"Silence," the assassin girl ordered.

At some point, though he didn't know when, she had gotten up and was now brandishing two needles from behind them, right at the backs of their heads.

“Understood. I’ll shut up.”

“Absolutely. No more from me.”

Zita and Mattheus both held up one hand, as if swearing an oath.

“...I just don’t get it, though...”

“That’s just as well. It’s so like you, after all,” Leonardo laughed, leaving a stymied Alberic in the lurch.

\*\*\*

Locational advantage was the main idea behind the art of war—that was what he had learned back in the Acura village.

He had also been taught that when faced with a difficult situation, a person would tend to forget their original objective. However, this could be countered by taking a step back and assessing the entire situation. Doing so often opened up useful paths to victory in unexpected places.

Adhering to this line of thinking, Tohru decided to first take a walk around the mansion, examining its interior.

He found that structurally, there wasn’t anything too unusual.

The majority of noble’s mansions had a specific architecture to them—four walls around the outside, and an open area on the inside. Dominica Scoda’s mansion was much the same—a square building walled in on all sides, and a courtyard in the middle.

“What a simple mansion,” Tohru muttered his thoughts out loud.

She was a military woman before she was a countess, so in that respect the idea that she would want to live in such simple quarters wasn’t particularly surprising...but she didn’t even have any decorations or anything. She was a military woman, so Tohru figured she’d at least have some weapons or suits of armor on display, but there was nothing of the sort.

Furthermore, it looked like she rarely cleaned house.

Dust had accumulated everywhere, to the point that wherever Tohru walked he left footprints. The atmosphere really was that of an abandoned house; that

was to say, there were no other signs of life anywhere.

“Still...a pretty unusual situation.”

As Tohru walked the hallways, he muttered to himself, mixing a sigh in.

As he had mentioned to Chaika, if it came down to taking the remains by force, then they had no choice but to confront the dragoon cavalier Dominica Scoda. Still, it was a dragoon cavalier versus two saboteurs and a wizard. If he had to put into words, the idea of going up against her made him incredibly uneasy.

“To think we’d end up going against a dragoon cavalier...”

Dragoon cavaliers were in a whole different class from a normal cavalier or soldier.

You might as well think of them as a demi-human cavalier.

Put crudely, they were “part-monster”, or “beings who had sold their soul and dignity to the Feyra.” Many saw them as existences that had already forfeited their humanity.

They had exchanged part of their body for that of a dragoon, implanted it, and become “part-dragon.”

Basically, the dragoon Feyra would give over a part of its body to the cavalier, and the cavalier’s magic would effectively be raised to that of a dragoon.

“A dragoon...huh.”

Several varieties of beings called “dragons” had been identified here on Verbist, like wyverns and wyrms, but none of them could be called Feyra. They couldn’t use magic, and their intelligence wasn’t very high—mere “large lizards”, some would say. There had been a wyrm nest close to the Acura village, so Tohru was relatively familiar with them.

Dragoons, on the other hand, were Feyra.

They could use magic, they were smart, and it was even in the name—they were armor-wearing dragons.

Or to be more precise, they were able to harden and transform parts of their

bodies, raising their defenses to astronomical levels. Basically a dragon's magic was "the ability to alter their own body."

But it wasn't as simple as that they were near-invincible.

By using their body-altering magic, on the off-chance they did receive a serious wound they were able to heal it immediately.

And it was the same for the dragoon cavalier, who was effectively one with the dragoon.

Through the use of a "pact," even if they were a short distance away from each other, a dragoon's magic would reach the dragoon cavalier.

Therefore, it was impossible to even nearly kill them when they were armed. If they so desired, they could use the dragoon's magic to equip themselves with armor in a split second, or they could even fabricate a sword or spear by lengthening their skin. What's more, as long as they didn't get any of their vital areas like their head or heart destroyed, they could heal their body any time they needed to.

All this made dragoon cavaliers enough of a threat already.

But that was without factoring in the attack power of the dragon itself.

They had massive builds that easily dwarfed that of horses and cows, and were equipped with muscles that, naturally, were not even in the same league as a human's. They could punch, kick, swing its tail, or flap their wings. With simple attacks like that, dragons could level houses with one attack or smash holes into castle walls.

In other words, just because regular dragons couldn't attack with magic didn't mean they weren't strong.

"If only there was some sort of weak point..."

To be honest, he knew next to nothing about the ecology of dragoon cavaliers.

There weren't that many of them to begin with. The countries had started treating them like some big military secret, and so information about them no longer circulated. Tohru only knew this information based on what his war-

veteran senior saboteurs had told him—he had never seen one in person.

Dragons on their own were said to show up in the most surprising places ... even soldiers in the same encampment as dragoon cavaliers said that they showed up before you knew it, and you couldn't even tell whether or not you were approaching one—that sort of stealthy manner of movement despite their massive size apparently made them all the more unsettling.

“If it’s that big, perhaps we should stage our attack in the mansion—but then if the mansion gets destroyed in the process and we get crushed under the rubble, that’d be pointless.”

If it came down to a fight, and they lured Dominica into the mansion, perhaps that would at least keep the dragon from interfering.

Mulling over all this in his head, Tohru opened the door to the courtyard and went in—

“...!?”

A single girl was standing there.

It was as unexpected as a solitary flower blooming in the desert.

A small, modest flower bed had been set in the courtyard, but instead of flowers, there were only weeds. Almost as if to contrast the appearance the ruined flower bed gave off, the girl waited there; tidy, prim, proper.

“Who in the...?” There was a hint of tension in Tohru’s voice.

Because he couldn’t feel her presence at all.

*An acquaintance of Guy’s, perhaps?*

Even when looking straight at her, he felt nothing indicating she was actually there.

She looked to be in her early teens, maybe about Chaika’s age. Perhaps one or two years younger.

She wore a light-pink dress, and her long hair was tied up with red hair ornaments. She was cute, but it was a subdued kind of cute. Somewhat transient, almost—he got the impression of a pure maiden.

“...Um...” Tohru spoke up.

Yet the girl didn’t respond.

Who...in the world was she? He hadn’t felt anyone else’s presence in this house except Dominica’s, and he felt that way even now. There were, of course, ways to conceal your presence, but...it was definitely weird to not feel anything from her even though she was standing right in front of him.

“This is—”

As he inched closer to the girl, he stared at her, waiting for some sort of reaction. As he thought, she was ignoring him completely.

All she did was just stand there, staring out into empty space.

Almost as if—

“...Hm.”

Crouching down, Tohru grabbed a pebble lying on the ground, and using his index finger, flicked it towards the girl. The pebble headed straight for her—

“I knew it.”

It passed right through her.

The girl was an illusion. A mirage...no, more like a projection.

Tohru had heard of this...a device that projected a phantom. While it lacked an actual physical form, the device could make one believe that it really existed. It seemed like magic, but apparently the effect could be achieved with a simple apparatus. However, a projection was a projection, and so it was delicate enough that a mere change in the temperature or humidity of the environment around it would blur the image, giving it away.

“Could it be a portrait of someone?” Tohru muttered, knitting his eyebrows.

It was so bold—like a picture drawn with enough depth that you could reach out and touch it. Just out of curiosity’s sake, Tohru reached out his hand—

“Don’t touch her.”

He heard a quiet voice.

“...”

Tohru turned to look behind him.

Of course, he had felt a presence coming up behind him, but...

“Ah, no...I was...just...” Tohru faked a flustered demeanor.

Standing at the edge of the courtyard...was Dominica.

“My apologies.” Dominica shook her head, as if she had instantly regretted what she’d just said. “It’s not like you could touch her even if you tried, is it?”

“...Uh, no, I also apologize.” In an admirable gesture, Tohru lowered his head. “She’s just so beautiful, I...”

“‘Beautiful’, huh,” Dominica muttered. She closed her eyes, as if lost in thought. Then after a bit, she returned Tohru’s gaze and gave him a small smile.

“Thank you.”

“Who is she? A family member?”

Though he asked anyway, he already had a pretty good idea.

On the phantom girl, he could see resemblances to Dominica here and there. It could have been Dominica in her younger years, but although there were many similarities between the two, the overall feel she gave off was different. Dominica didn’t have the transient, flower-swaying-in-the-wind demeanor that this girl had. On the contrary—her impression was strong, like a towering tree firmly rooted in the earth.

After a brief, almost hesitant pause, she answered.

“Lucie Scoda. My younger sister.”

“I see.” Nodding, Tohru took another look at the illusion of Lucie.

In some respects, her figure reminded him almost of Chaika. What specifically about her that brought Chaika to mind, though, Tohru couldn’t put his finger on. Perhaps this similarity was one of the reasons Dominica was acting so affable towards them.

“...”

“...”

Tohru and Dominica stayed silent.

The two stood there, staring at the illusion, when...

“You’re not going to ask?” Dominica asked in a quiet, weary voice.

As he had already confirmed, there was no one else living here. Dominica had said as much earlier, and he could tell from the lack of presence. Which meant that Dominica wasn’t living together with her sister.

She was expressly decorating this garden with her sister’s image.

There were a limited number of explanations for this behavior. Also, remembering the almost reflexive, vehement way in which she had prohibited a complete stranger from touching the illusion...that right there told the tale of how deep her fixation ran.

It was how one acted towards something that they would never again be able to hold.

Which meant...

“Did she pass away?”

“...That’s right.”

Dominica wore an expression of self-loathing.

She let out a single sigh—perhaps she actually felt a sense of relief at being asked—and continued.

“It was while I was off to war.”

“...”

It was similar to when Tohru had told Chaika about his past, about the girl Jasmine. Perhaps she too had been wanting to confide in someone, spill it out to a complete stranger far removed from it all. Maybe this was even the reason she had saved Tohru’s group and even went out of her way to invite them to her home. Or, she could have harbored feelings of guilt after hearing Akari’s whopper of a tale, thinking that after hearing someone else’s secret, she needed to expose her own in order for her feelings to maintain equilibrium.

"My sister was everything to me. And yet, she perished. I could not protect her."

Tohru offered a concise "What a pity."

He realized that words intended to comfort were cheap, and could actually even trample on the receiver's heart even further. Even a million words couldn't bring the dead back to life. Therefore, keeping your mouth shut was also a form of paying respects.

"I became a dragoon cavalier because I wanted my sister to live in safety and luxury. Our parents died early on, so it was just two sisters, one younger and one older, practically living shoulder-to-shoulder..."

She laughed self-derisively.

"Ridiculous, isn't it? I became a dragoon cavalier for her sake, and yet it was precisely because I had become one that I couldn't be near to protect her."

Dragoon cavaliers had incredible strength.

In terms of the battlefield, it was their impenetrable defense in particular that made them perfect for the front lines.

Take just one dragoon cavalier out of a unit or even an entire army, and their chances of winning would decrease dramatically. It was most likely a situation where regardless of her own feelings, there was no way she could leave. Just her being there saved numerous people from death. It didn't matter how much she longed to see her sister's face; if she left for a reason like that, she might as well have been ordering her comrades to die.

*Could that also...be why she lives in seclusion?*

After having her most precious thing snatched away from her, she probably couldn't give a damn about a countess's authority or a dragoon cavalier's renown.

"The Scoda family was...a fallen family of cavaliers to begin with."

With a groan, she began to tell the story.

"My father went to war and never returned, and my mother died of illness... our land was small, and we didn't have the luxury of hired hands. Our family

was literally hanging on by a thread, ready to snap at any moment. With just us left, even the villagers looked down on the Scoda family. They would neglect to pay taxes and such...it was a hard life."

No matter how much their revenue dwindled, a count had to live like a count. They weren't allowed to live like commoners. This also caused the Scodas to continue to lose respect in the villagers' eyes. It was only out of fear that they continued to comply.

But...once Dominica had left for war, all that remained of the family was a single girl not even yet of age. And apparently there were those within the village that saw this as an opportunity to capitalize on.

They barged into their estate and demanded that, for the good of the population, she was to hand over everything she owned. She was just barely hanging on the family's dignity as a countess, and yet the men determined that she had been living in extravagance. They asserted that while the rest of the territory was just barely getting along, the Scodas had been living in the lap of luxury all the while.

At a loss, Lucie gave them just about everything she had.

But the items entrusted to her that had accumulated over generations, like the inherited swords and suit of armor, as well as the works of art bestowed upon them by the crown, she had refused to part with. They were the last vestiges of the cavalier pedigree the Scoda family embodied. This was the family her mother had died protecting and that her older sister had inherited, and now it was up to her to protect it at all costs. That had to be what was running through her mind at the time.

But...there was no way the villagers could understand that.

Enraged at such absurdity, the villagers lost all sense of reason, ganged up on her, and beat her. Having been hit in vital spots, the condition of the downed girl worsened, and just like that, she passed away.

"You may have already heard this from the villagers at Ratison, but..."

Her self-deprecating smile warped.

"After learning the truth...I murdered all the villagers that had laid their hands

on my sister."

*Aha, so that's the "villager-massacre" I heard about,*  
Tohru realized.

Dominica's actions could be seen as punishment towards those who raised their fists to a member of the countess's family, but even though she was a count, the slaughter was so one-sided that a trial wasn't even necessary, and the act was seen as one born from mental derangement. It was even worse since Dominica was a dragoon cavalier. The murdered villagers hadn't even had a chance to resist.

"I was prepared to suffer the consequences...but, ironically enough, I had earned a number of accolades from the war's final battle, and so the crown acquitted me. I ended up receiving ownership of this town's land, and so I moved here."

"I see."

That was likely also the reason Dominica had no interest in governing this land. Having just had the land foisted upon her, and having even lost her beloved sister in the end, of course she would have a *laissez-faire* attitude towards it.

"...No, I apologize."

Having finished recounting her circumstances, Dominica shook her head weakly.

"This has nothing to do with you. Please forgive me, and consider your lodgings paid."

"No, think nothing of it," Tohru replied.

But...

*What's with this...unpleasant feeling?*

Tohru was mulling something over in the corner of his mind.

Dominica probably wasn't lying. She wouldn't have had any reason to lie here.

But...

*Is it because of the time elapsed?*

She was recounting this story awfully matter-of-factly, almost as if she was a storyteller offering him a fairy tale. Having encountered tragedy, she had given herself over to her anger and murdered a number of villagers, and yet Tohru couldn't feel that outburst of emotion anywhere within her now.

Perhaps time really did heal all wounds.

So after several years, she had managed to come to terms with her own sister's death?

Or...

*Could it be because...she's a dragoon cavalier?*

Could a dragon's magic also be able to heal wounds of the heart?

Or perhaps becoming one with the dragoon meant that you forfeited your emotions as a human?

"By the way, Miss Scoda," Tohru began, trying to make it seem like he had just hit upon the idea, "you're a dragoon cavalier, correct?"

"Yes, what of it?" Dominica tilted her head.

Looking around the courtyard, Tohru asked her the question that had been bugging him the most.

"I don't see the dragoon around anywhere. Where is it?"

It was in the name—a dragoon cavalier was one with the dragon.

Once in effect, a dragoon cavalier's "pledge", or the pact they made with their dragoon, could only be dispelled if either one of them happened to die. Even if they were some distance away from each other, the pact would still remain, so they didn't have to be together 24/7...but even so, Tohru had heard that in most cases the dragon and the dragoon cavalier acted together.

But Tohru hadn't sensed hide nor hair of a dragon anywhere in this mansion.

Of course, the dragon probably hadn't died. Tohru and the others had seen her use the dragon's transformation magic to change clothes, after all.

"Ah, that..." Dominica nodded, her expression somewhat indiscernible. After

appearing deep in thought for a moment...

“Due to some...circumstances, it’s a bit further away from here.”

That was all she said.

It seemed she wasn’t going to divulge the details of those circumstances.

“Well, it’s actually more convenient this way.”

“And...why is that?”

“Normal people see dragons as a species of Feyra. If a dragon was in your vicinity, you people would be on edge to the point of being unable to sleep. Even on the battlefield, all the soldiers made camp as far away from me as they could.”

“But I’ve heard that dragoons are a different story...?”

Although they all fell under the same umbrella of “Feyra,” the dragoon and the kraken were fundamentally different from the other Feyra in that they possessed high intelligence. Because of that, there were aspects of them that could not be controlled. Looking at it from the reverse, though, having such intelligent creatures meant rather than one-sided domination and servitude, you could enter into a cooperative relationship with them, and things like pacts were possible.

“It’s the same.” Dominica shook her head. “An aberration is an aberration. It doesn’t matter if the dragon has feelings or not. That’s why humans are—ah, never mind.”

It seemed like she was about to say something...but Dominica stopped right there and shook her head, as if to nip that thought in the bud.

“At any rate, no need to concern yourself with it.”

“...Sure.” Tohru offered a vague reply.

She said “don’t concern yourself with it,” but there was no way he couldn’t.

If it came down to having to fight Dominica in order to steal the remains, the fact that her dragoon was off in some unknown place meant that they might be able to sneak-attack her after all.

However, there was still a problem. They didn't know for sure whether or not she actually had the remains.

"Oh, by the way, Miss Scoda."

"What?"

"Just a bit ago, you mentioned that you received certain accolades during the war."

"Indeed. A reward for continuing to fight almost to my last breath."

"What, specifically, were they?"

"I was there during the battle for the capital of the Gaz Empire."

She said it right out.

But rather than pride, she spoke of it almost with embarrassment, with a despondent expression on her face. It must have been because of what happened to her sister. There was no way she could be proud of her accomplishments after that.

"I received this land from His Majesty as a result of that battle. However, to be honest, now that Lucie's gone owning this land is nothing but a nuisance."

"Society, power, fame, assets...none of it matters to you, huh?"

"...Exactly. I have no need for any of it."

This too, Dominica affirmed succinctly.

*Then...*

There was a chance she had already given away the remains.

Or, rather, if she hadn't...then they could possibly strike a deal with her to obtain them.

"So, what about it?" Dominica asked with a puzzled expression. It seemed she hadn't seen through to the real purpose of the question.

"Oh, nothing, it's just that...for a countess and noble, you're rather...you know."

"I live rather plainly.' Is that what you want to say?" A slight smile appeared

on her face.

“Putting it frankly, then yes. I was wondering why that was.”

“Truthfully, I no longer have anything that I desire,” she said, indifferent. “However, even now, if I was able to wish for anything I wanted in the world, it’d have to be...”

At that point, her voice trailed off.

As though she were reminiscing, she stared at the sky with faraway eyes.

“It would be...?” Tohru urged her on.

But she just stood there, seemingly lost for an answer, and then at last...

“I know it’s ridiculous, but...”

Her gaze returned to Tohru.

“I’d like to stand on the battlefield again, one more time.”

“...”

The end of the long war had finally brought an era of peace.

Tohru had thought there were probably only a small fraction of the populace who were like him, sick of peace—or perhaps they were actually the majority?—but even so, he was not expecting to come across someone else who also wished to plunge the world into war once more.

Even less so, someone who had aided in the Gaz Empire’s collapse.

Even Chaika didn’t necessarily wish for war—

“Oh yes. As for meals...”

Suddenly changing gears, Dominica spoke.

“Ah...yes.”

“To be honest, I don’t have any ingredients. I go out to hunt on occasion and smoke wild boar or deer meat, but that’s about it.”

“No need to worry there. We will take care of ourselves. Thank you for your concern on our behalf.”

Tohru bowed his head. In truth there were some preserved rations still in the Svetrana, so surely they could portion out and make do with their current ingredients and foodstuffs for at least a week.

“I see. Then, feel free to use the kitchen at your leisure.”

“Understood.” Tohru nodded.

But...

*What the hell? Yeah, this is definitely weird.*

But of course, he couldn’t put into words exactly what was so strange.

In the back of Tohru’s mind, a number of misgivings were flitting around, not yet able to manifest fully.

## Part 3

The room Dominica had lent them was on the inner second floor.

“But really, what’s up with this mansion?”

Their conversation in the courtyard was over, and Tohru was in the process of surveying the mansion once again.

Yes, it was small, but aside from that the structure was nothing unusual. It was essentially the kind of mansion any noble would own. Saboteurs like Tohru would undertake assassination missions on occasion, so they possessed a general knowledge of the layout of these mansions.

However, there was one unusual point.

The mansion felt like it had barely been lived in. The walls and pillars looked brand-new, like the kind you would find in a home that had just been built; however, while the floor had no visible scuffs or scrapes, it was completely covered in dust. It looked almost as if it had been abandoned after its construction, and had had no tenants since. Perhaps—none of the rooms except Dominica’s had ever even been set foot in. Thinking about what Dominica had said about no longer having any interest in fame or fortune, as long as there was a roof over her head so she could rest without worrying about rain or wind, anything else was probably trivial. For her, that probably wasn’t so unusual.

Although...

“Something’s...still bugging me...”

Muttering to himself, Tohru opened the door to his designated guest room.

Though comparatively small, this was a noble’s mansion after all, and so the guest room was still quite large. The entirety of the dilapidated shack Tohru and Akari stayed in at Del Solant could probably fit in this one room. While there were no decorations, there was a bed, a set of candle stands, and a writing desk; in other words, the bare essentials for one to stay the night.

However, this room, too, was like the others in that it looked like it hadn’t

been used in years.

A thick layer of dust coated the entire area, and even the air felt unclean. It wasn't the kind of unclean you could take care of by just cracking the window open a bit, either—it was the kind of moldy, musty nastiness characteristic of an abandoned building.

And in the midst of it...

“...”

Tohru scowled.

The area around the bed, pushed up against the wall, was oddly immaculate.

It was the only area that had been cleaned, as if it was the only part of the room that mattered.

It had been quite a while since Tohru's group last had the opportunity able to sleep soundly with a roof over their head, so it wasn't like Tohru didn't understand the feeling of finally obtaining a good bed.

However.

“...Akari.”

“What is it, Nii-sama?”

Akari, standing at the bedside, replied to him.

“May I ask you something?”

“Absolutely, Nii-sama. If it's a question from my beloved brother, I will answer, no matter how embarrassing. Ask away, from the color of my underwear to when my safe day is,” Akari said, gripping her fist tightly for some reason.

Her enthusiasm was clearly misplaced.

“And why are you assuming that it's something embarrassing?”

“Because you prefaced your question with “may I.” That means it's something I'd normally be embarrassed to answer.”

“What use would I have for knowing something like the color of someone's

underwear, anyway?"

"You're not interested, Nii-sama?"

"I'm not interested in your underwear, at least."

"I see. You mean to say 'it's not the underwear that's important, it's what's inside them.'

"As if!"

"By the way, currently I'm not wearing any."

"—!?"

"That was a joke," Akari said in her deadpan voice.

*"This*

is what I want to ask you about!" Heaving a sigh, he pointed to the bed.

The bed itself was your normal, everyday bed. It was a canopy bed, but that was a common piece of furniture for nobles—the bed wasn't what had him concerned.

"Why are there two pillows here?"

"Because someone put them there."

"And who was it?"

"Me."

"Then it's okay if I get rid of one of these, right?"

"If that's what you desire, Nii-sama, I won't stop you, but two people on one pillow sounds awfully cramped."

"..." Tohru glared at Akari with half-lidded eyes.

But Akari, unfazed, brazenly returned Tohru's glare.

"Nii-sama, perhaps you've forgotten, but we're supposed to be  
*wuvvy-duvvy*

siblings tangled up in a forbidden love, chased from our hometown and on the run from our family."

“...Don’t say *wuvvy-duvvy*.”

“Kidding.”

“Of course you are.”

“Kind of.”

“Say you’re *completely* kidding!” Tohru let out a groan.

“At any rate, we can’t let that dragoon cavalier suspect anything, so I propose that we need to make our “immoral sibling” ruse as thorough as possible.”

That was why Akari suggested they sleep in the same room and the same bed.

“There’s no need to go so far in a secluded room like this! It’s just overacting at that point!”

Then, he looked around the room.

“Actually, where’s Chaika?”

“The next room over.” Akari pointed to the wall.

“We have a lot of things we need to discuss. Which room would be better to gather in, though...” Tohru muttered.

“Probably this one. It’s a double room, in name at least.”

Akari must have sensed that it was now time to be serious, as she replied immediately.

“By the way, I did a basic check for any voice tubes or hidden traps, and this room seems to be safe. I would bet the next room over is as well,” she added.

Before spending the night somewhere, saboteurs would habitually first check the area for any tricks or traps. Well, it was less a habit and more a rule. In more extreme cases, there could be an assassin lurking underneath the bed, voice tubes for intercepting messages, magical surveillance devices, or other cleverly-hidden traps that would go unnoticed if the room wasn’t searched first.

“Okay, I’ll go call her.” He went back out into the hallway.

\*

“Good person, Dominica Scoda.”

That was what Chaika had to say.

“Well, you’re not wrong, but...”

Tohru crossed his arms and let out a sigh.

He had called Chaika over from the adjacent room, and Tohru had just finished giving a suggestion for a plan.

“*Incredibly* nice,” she said, hitting the bed for emphasis.

It was just as Chaika said—Dominica Scoda had been very accommodating towards them. Of course, Dominica was unaware of their true background and objective, but even so, for a couple of coincidentally acquainted strangers she was really rolling out the red carpet. Ordinarily, one wouldn’t even open their door to someone who had such an unclear background.

“I think the reason she’s being so nice is that *you’re* here, Chaika.” Tohru declared.

“Mui?”

“During the war—no, directly after it, it seems—she ended up losing her sister. Look out there, you can even see it from this room...that thing in the garden.” He pointed to the window.

Of course, “that thing” he was referring to was the hologram of Lucie Scoda.

“When you put the two of you side by side, you look similar. And you pretty much look the same age.”

“They do look somewhat alike,” Akari agreed, looking out the window.

“She blames herself for heading out to war instead of staying to protect her sister. Because of that, it seems she’s lost all interest in fame, fortune, or power. It could also be why she seems so indifferent to everything.”

If she had the mindset that nothing mattered anymore, of course she wouldn’t have any qualms opening her home up to complete strangers. It also followed that she wouldn’t care about their background.

“But Nii-sama, when did you find this all out?”

Akari looked away from the window and back to Tohru.

“In the garden just now.”

“That’s my Nii-sama.” She nodded and crossed her arms in a display of what looked like admiration. “You sure are a master of getting women to let their guard down.”

“Is that praise or an insult!?”

“It’s praise, of course. Imagine, me insulting my beloved Nii-sama.” She shook her head dismissively, but then she took her fist in her palm, as if she just hit upon something. “No, wait, Nii-sama. If you actually really love being insulted, then this humble Akari Acura will give all she has to make you the target of constant disparage.”

“Just be quiet already.”

“It goes without saying, but binding, whipping, kicking and trampling are all on the table if necessary.”

“Just shut up. I’m begging you, shut up,” groaned Tohru.

“But wow, Dominica Scoda has a thing for her sister, huh.”

“I. Said. Shut. Up. Don’t lump her in with your warped character. It’s a normal relationship. Normal.”

The love that Dominica and Lucie shared was probably innocuous, familial love.

*At least, it wasn’t the type of love that included binding, whipping, kicking, or trampling*

, he thought. At least, he wanted

to believe that. But it wasn’t like he knew their circumstances anyway.

“*At any rate.*” He cleared his throat to indicate they were going back to the topic at hand. “You’re right, Chaika. Dominica Scoda isn’t a bad person. Treating us the way she did was an altruistic deed. She accommodates complete strangers...almost like a saint. However...” Tohru pointed right at Chaika’s face. “Have you forgotten, ‘Chaika Gaz?’ This dragoon cavalier was most likely one of your father’s enemies.”

“...”

Chaika’s expression clouded over.

Yes. Whether she had a piece of his corpse or not, this person had been present at the battle for the Gaz Empire’s capital, and it was highly likely that she was one of the heroes who had a direct stake in crushing him.

“...”

Chaika appeared to be sinking further and further into despair. Most likely, after having the truth that she was trying so hard to avoid thrust right in front of her, she was now getting depressed—even if it was a bit late.

She curled herself up into the fetal position.

“Um...well, you know...”

Tohru stumbled over what to say. He hadn’t expected it to hit her *this*

hard. Sure, it was a statement that was intended to make her reflect upon her actions, but it now almost looked like he was bullying her.

“I, I’m not saying you have to hate her...necessarily...”

“...”

“Ahh, dammit, what do you want from me, an apology!?”

Tohru glanced over at Akari, hoping she would rescue him from this unpleasant atmosphere.

“I see now.” With her arms crossed, Akari gave a big nod. “So this is your “Throw Them Into Turmoil” technique. Not bad.”

“It’s nothing to be impressed over!”

Tohru had reached his yelling limit.

But then Chaika—

“I, apologize. To Tohru.”

And though a bit forced, she smiled.

"Tohru, always thinking. Always trying, hardest. Not in the wrong."

As always, her grasp on the common language of the continent was less than stellar, so sometimes it was hard to parse out what she meant....but basically, Tohru understood that she was trying to say "Tohru is always thinking about what's best for me and trying harder than anyone else, so there's no way he's the one in the wrong." It seemed that she was trying to console him, or rather, just be nice to him.

"Ah..." Tohru scratched his cheek.

Putting his embarrassment aside for now...

"So anyway, I take that to mean that you're against this plan?"

"Muu..." Chaika looked conflicted.

"Even though it's pretty much our best chance of pulling this off..."

Tohru had proposed that they employ the use of drugs.

To be more specific, poison.

They had to confirm whether or not she had the remains. But what would happen after that? That was the problem.

Of course, Tohru had anticipated Chaika's "good person" part of her response, so he also had been considering a simple negotiation for the remains.

Dominica, who no longer cared for the world or its material possessions, might also see the remains as inconsequential. The possibility that she might just hand them over wasn't zero.

But, how should he reply when she asked why they wanted the remains of Emperor Gaz?

Society widely regarded the Gaz Empire as "the root of all evil." Though she was effectively retired, if a dragoon cavalier "good person" knew that the daughter of the "Taboo Emperor" was right in front of her, would she change her tune? Tohru didn't want to find out.

And he also had to think about the chance that she might refuse.

*If that happened...she'd be even harder to deal with than she is now.*

She would definitely regard Tohru, Akari, and Chaika with suspicion.

Sneak attack or not, an alert dragoon cavalier was nigh-impossible to defeat.

And as for a weak point...the woman had practically become a hermit due to losing her beloved sister, so Tohru couldn't even begin to imagine what would rile her up at this point.

So Tohru determined that the safest option was to put all their eggs in one basket and strike while she was still unaware...which is what led him to propose the plan.

However, Tohru had no idea how much poison, or any drug for that matter, it would take to affect a dragoon cavalier. Their recovery magic might not only cover the skin, but also reach the nerves and internal organs. Not only were there few dragoon cavaliers to begin with, but the full spectrum of their abilities was a closely-guarded military secret. As such, it was difficult to tell how much of the information Tohru had heard was actually genuine.

“An amount way over the lethal dose” was probably a good guess.

If they used a substance that paralyzed the nerves, it should render her immobile for a while even if it didn’t kill her. Dragoon cavaliers were beings that wouldn’t die unless you cut their head from their body—but perhaps that also meant complicated areas like the brain took longer to heal, or maybe weren’t able to heal at all.

“Well, in the end, we’re just saboteurs.” Tohru sighed. “We’re not picky about achieving our objectives, but in this case this objective...isn’t ours.”

“...Tohru?”

Chaika blinked her violet eyes.

In a tone that left absolutely no room for confusion, Tohru said the following.

“When you get right down to it, our objective is whatever you want it to be, Master.”

“Tohru...I...” A mixture of surprise, joy, fear, and worry appeared on Chaika’s face as she stared at Tohru.

He then made it a point to deliver his next words coldly, in an attempt to stifle

his own sentiments to the best of his ability.

“So if you say “let’s not do this,” if you’d rather prioritize letting the “good person” Dominica Scoda live over your own goal of gathering the remnants, then we have no right to stop you.”

When something is gained, something else is lost.

That held true even in a recovery mission.

Something is always used up, whether it be time, money, honor, fellowship, love, or trust.

“I can come up with the methods, but it’s up to you, our client, to decide whether to implement them.”

“...”

Chaika looked hesitantly at Tohru, and then Akari. Yet Akari only nodded. She shared Tohru’s opinion.

“Well...you don’t have to decide right this instant.” Truth be told, she was hard to look at right now. Tohru averted his eyes from the downcast Chaika—a half-baked action coming from a saboteur who made it a principle to utilize their spirit, technique and physical condition as tools to fit any situation.

“However, we probably don’t have that much time. That cavalier’s group will catch up to us soon enough.”

“...Understood.” Eyes still cast downwards, a crease formed between her eyebrows.

However...

*Well, an immediate answer is probably too much to ask for*  
, Tohru reasoned.

Chaika’s hesitation was likely born from the same weakness that afflicts a soldier before and after their first battle. It wasn’t just soldiers—anyone on the battlefield, be it saboteur or cavalier, likely went through the same thing.

Up until that point, the “enemy” had been an abstract being, a target of destruction in countless practice drills. But on the battlefield, staring down a

flesh-and-blood enemy, any preparation and resolve immediately flew out the window. Not only that, but the techniques you had spit up blood to master, practically etched into your body, were lost to the wind.

Of course, some suffered less extreme setbacks. However, the initial shock of a situation with a high possibility of death did have somewhat of an adverse affect on one's fighting prowess.

Yes. The enemy was no abstraction, nor object. They were living, breathing humans. That was obvious, but knowing it and experiencing it were two different things.

The raid at Del Solant had most likely been Chaika's first recovery mission. That was the only piece of the remains that she had, at least. Therefore, she should've had little to no prior experience facing off with an enemy, much less stealing from one. Not to mention, the count displayed unbridled killing intent towards Tohru's group, so she hadn't yet experienced the pangs of conscience.

But Dominica Scoda was a different story

They had come across her unprepared, and she had even rescued them. They had been recipients of her goodwill.

Therefore Chaika was unable to steel her resolve to view this woman as her enemy, even going so far as to call her a "good person."

That in itself, Tohru thought, was not a bad thing. In fact, it was an admirable characteristic, a wholly human sentiment.

But even so—

"..."

Clearly glum, Chaika's gaze dropped to her knees.

\*

I'm not sure if it's suitable enough fare for a count of your stature, but..."

With that apology, Tohru set Dominica's plate down in front of her.

They were all gathered in the Scoda residence's dining room. Tohru, Akari and Chaika had invited Dominica to dinner.

The mansion's kitchen had obviously been neglected for years. From the oven to the kitchen utensils, everything had been coated in dust. Tohru and Akari, having tidied up to a point where the kitchen was usable again, had cooked up a simple meal using ingredients brought over from the Svetrana. And Chaika, ousted from the kitchen because her clumsy, accident-prone nature ensured she would be nothing but a hindrance, had been in charge of cleaning the dining room area, which had been just as dusty as all the other rooms.

"Well, it's true I am a count, but before that I was sleeping and eating meals on the battlefield. Far be it from me to possess such an ostentatious palate. On the contrary, I find it to be quite nostalgic." Dominica smiled.

In front of her was a slab of dried meat rehydrated in bone marrow soup, stir-fried vegetables, scrambled eggs, and sliced bread. A quick, painless meal, yet one that still managed to include all the necessary nutrients. It was indeed reminiscent of a meal you might be served on the battlefield.

"We are so grateful." Akari and Tohru both bowed their heads in unison.

However—

*Where the hell does she normally eat?* That was bugging him.

As aforementioned, it was evident that neither the kitchen nor the dining room had been used in a number of years. No, not just that. Judging from the amount of dust over the whole household, it was like the whole building was deserted. It wasn't just filthy; it was as if

*no one was even living here.*

"..."

As Chaika brought her own portion of bread to her mouth and chewed, she would periodically glance over at Dominica and then immediately avert her eyes. She was clearly feeling uneasy, probably still torn over whether or not to risk talking it out with Dominica and lay their circumstances bare in the process.

Of course, if Dominica was to agree and hand over the remains, they couldn't ask for a better outcome. But if she refused, their hand would be forced and they'd have to face her on extremely unfavorable conditions. Depending on the circumstances, they could end up dead. Taking that into account, the best

option really was to poison her, and then confirm if she had what they were looking for.

But...

“...Mui?”

Chaika tilted her head, something having just come to her attention.

Dominica’s fork hand had frozen in midair, and she was staring directly at Chaika.

“Ah, please forgive me.” Dominica smiled wryly. “I was just lost in thought. My little sister, see, would have looked similar to you were she still alive.”

“Little...sister...”

“Oh, but it must be quite unpleasant to be told you look like someone who’s already passed on. My apologies.”

“No problem, no problem!” Chaika waved her hands in a fluster.

“I’m aware how ridiculous this sounds, but...I wasn’t with my sister when she died. By the time I returned, she was already in the ground. So sometimes I’ll find myself thinking that she’s going to appear right in front of me the next day. The height of idiocy, really,” Dominica said.

“Understand...can sympathize. Greatly.” Chaika nodded with agreement.

*Shit...*

thought Tohru beside her. Chaika was showing empathy towards Dominica. Tohru was thinking that as long as Chaika gave a definite answer, even if it was “let’s give up on the remains” or “if she refuses, we can just explain everything and reveal our backgrounds”, it was going to be fine—he would come up with a countermeasure for any setbacks. But in Chaika’s case, simply agonizing over it might not be enough for her to come to a decision. When all was said and done, she wasn’t the type to force others to her will for her own convenience—in other words, she was a “good person.”

*So Chaika never witnessed her father’s death, either.*

Losing a father and losing a sister were two different things, but there was no

helping the fact that the two were now bonding over their similar circumstances. A family member had died, and they had been unaware.

*...So then.*

It was becoming clearer that at this rate, Chaika wasn't going to reach a decision any time soon. Gillette's group would catch up to them, and he couldn't guarantee the girl's safety after that.

"Miss Scoda." Tohru stopped eating and addressed her directly.

"What is it?"

"May I ask you a question, please?"

"If you have something you need answered, ask away." Toward Tohru's overtly formal tone, she seemed almost wary.

Tohru closed his eyes, hardening his resolve.

And then—

"You wouldn't happen to possess one of Emperor Gaz's remains, would you?"

"—!?"

The one who looked the most surprised at Tohru's question was actually Chaika. Akari just went on scarfing down food as though Tohru hadn't even spoken. She had been with Tohru for as long as he could remember, though, so perhaps she had predicted this outcome.

"I heard that you're one of the heroes of that war, the ones who directly subjugated Emperor Gaz. I also heard that even though it was officially announced that Emperor Gaz's body was incinerated in an explosion, in truth the heroes divided up the pieces of his corpse, each a valuable source of magical power, and each took a piece home with them..."

"Tohru—you..." Dominica raised her eyebrows as she stared at Tohru. She was surprised, but there was no trace of anger or hostility on her face.

"...Supposing that were true..." She gave a slight pause. "Just how did you get that information?"

"Because one of the Gaz Empire's own is right under your nose," Tohru

replied.

When he said it, he paid attention to where Dominica's eyes moved—however, she didn't especially look in Chaika's direction. It seemed that she was at least unaware that Chaika was the daughter of the Taboo Emperor.

But then—

*The count at Del Solant recognized Chaika. But Dominica's never seen her before, even though they're both heroes...what's that discrepancy mean? Was Chaika really not there during the attack after all?*

"I see." Tohru's thoughts were interrupted by Dominica's voice. "And—say I did have a piece of the remains. What are you going to do about it?"

She narrowed her eyes.

Even now, he couldn't feel any hostility or killing intent from her, nor did it seem like her mood had worsened. Her gaze was quiet and cool, as if she were ascertaining Tohru and the rest of them.

"Would you allow us to have it?"

"...You do realize that *if*

such a thing did exist, it would be worth more than gold itself, right?"

Arthur Gaz's remains weren't only valued as an excellent source of magical power. Just from the rarity of such an item, people would want it no matter the cost. It was forbidden in the majority of countries to traffick human bodies for their magical power, but if the price was right, they were willing to go to any lengths of deception.

"We're aware of how ridiculous this claim may seem."

"Whatever could you want it for?" Dominica asked, her eyes boring through him.

Tohru hesitated for a split second. He could, of course, come up with a plausible set of lies. But Dominica wasn't asking about the particulars of their circumstances. She was most likely asking the same fundamental question that Tohru had asked to Chaika earlier—namely,

*What's your objective?*

"There's a person dear to me."

Tohru said it outright.

"We need it to complete this person's objective."

"...!"

On the edge of his vision—he could see Chaika, wide-eyed, looking at him.

"Not for yourself?"

"My objective is to complete that person's objective."

"...Hm."

She nodded—and then, in the next instant.

The tip of her sword headed right for Tohru's face.

There was probably only a single sheet of cloth...no, a sheet of paper's length distance between the sword's sharp point and Tohru's forehead.

"...!"

Chaika leapt from her seat in astonishment and Akari readied her guard...but Tohru himself didn't budge an inch.

Because Dominica's attack was devoid of intent to kill. If she *had*

wanted to kill him, though, he wasn't confident he could have dodged in time. In the first place couldn't even determine when she had "created" her sword.

"I knew you weren't just some amateur," she said.

"Huh, so you *were* watching us during the orthrus fight. Still—"

With the cat out of the bag, there was no further need for Tohru to keep up the formal act.

"Honestly, that was faster than expected. Color me surprised. You didn't even chant a spell."

"Don't move a muscle." She brought the tip of her sword forward slightly,

grazing Tohru's forehead.

It didn't draw blood—yet. It had merely slipped under the elastic of the outermost layer of skin.

But if Dominica's hand were to waver one bit, the sword would pierce his forehead and blood would drip out.

"Your sister over there seems to be experienced as well. Assassins, perhaps? No, you don't seem to be the cavalier or soldier type. Which only leaves... mercenaries, or perhaps saboteurs."

"We're saboteurs."

As he replied, his gaze was not fixed on the sword nigh-penetrating his own forehead, but the equally sharp glare piercing him from the other end of the sword.

"But if you're saboteurs, I half-expected you to poison and assassinate me, then search the place at your leisure. I hear there's no such thing as foul play in your vocabulary?" Dominica retracted her sword.

"There's a reason for that. This way is much faster." Tohru shrugged. "Naturally, I'm not thrilled about the prospect of facing off against a dragoon cavalier. So I'll ask you again. If you really do possess the remains, won't you hand them over? They should be of no consequence to someone who has no interest in the world, its powers, or material capital, correct?"

"..."

After glaring at Tohru for a while, she turned to look at Chaika. The girl's silver hair was reflected in her lucid crimson eyes.

"...?"

Chaika flinched a bit in surprise...but perhaps not wanting to have Tohru take the whole fall, she mustered all her willpower and stared right back at Dominica.

And then—

"I do indeed have a piece of the remains."

Dominica said. Then she told them the next part quietly.

“But you will not have it...unless you can pry it from my dead body, you mongrels of war.”

# Chapter 4: The Limited War

## Part 1

The thing Chaika held was certainly very strange.

You could even go as far to say that the piece of flesh looked demonic. It was the disembodied left hand of a human.

To be honest, the thing floating inside the transparent cylinder more closely resembled a spider with legs extending from its body in all directions. The hand was somewhere in between being an open palm and a clenched fist. It looked like it had been right in the middle of trying to grab something and was frozen there.

“This is your ‘important thing?’” Tohru said what immediately came to his mind.

She had gone out of her way to employ and pay them, and they had crept into the mansion and in the end come face to face with the count himself (though that had just been the consequence), and for all that this was the object she had been trying to obtain? Tohru hadn’t had much to go on, but he had figured that it at least had to be some kind of treasure or work of art.

“Yes.” Chaika gave an enthusiastic nod.

Then it seemed there was no doubt. Chaika lowered the coffin that had been on her back, opened it up, and placed the cylinder inside on the left near the middle, in other words, exactly where a left hand would go if a body had been lying in there. Then she tied it secure with a piece of string.

“This was what you brought the coffin for, huh?”

“Yes.” Chaika nodded again.

Her expression showed no traces of uncertainty or doubt, only true elation.

But...

“What in the hell are you going to use that for? Actually, maybe I should first

ask, is that hand from a genuine dead human body?"

"..."

"And if it is someone's actual hand, then whose?"

"Tohru."

A small smile appeared on her lips.

"Akari."

"Hm?"

Akari tilted her head at her name being called as well.

"Grateful. All that's left, payment."

Rummaging around in her coffin, Chaika grabbed a few coins and held them out to Tohru and Akari. They were silver coins, and that wasn't all...they were Bohdan coins, which were in circulation primarily in the countries up north. Silver had always been quite common, so it was the type of currency that could be easily used anywhere in the continent.

"Here? Now?"

Tohru was shocked.

Sure, they weren't in the middle of their journey or anything, but he certainly didn't imagine that he would be given his pay on the way back home, out here in the open, so suddenly.

"What I mean to say is, are you...?"

"..."

Chaika kept smiling and held out the coins, silent and still.

Tohru understood what she was trying to convey through that behavior.

*She doesn't want anything to do with us anymore.*

When he thought about it, he realized that that was probably the reason why the details on the job had been so scant.

He didn't know anything about her circumstances, but to Chaika, Tohru and Akari were probably just temporary hires, nothing more than passing

acquaintances...no more, no less.

Most likely because of the unicorn battle, Tohru had just unconsciously harbored feelings of camaraderie and affinity.

From the start, he had been a stranger.

Therefore, once the job was done of course they would part ways. It was just that simple.

He didn't know if there were other things she was looking for, or, if so, where they were, but if she wanted them she would most certainly have to leave Del Solant.

"Grateful!"

Once more, Chaika held out the coins in both her hands.

As if to say, *What's wrong? Hurry up and take them!*

But for a brief moment, Tohru hesitated to do so.

He could feel Akari's questioning gaze next to him, but even so he didn't take the money.

Once he took it, that would be the end of their relationship.

It should have been the end.

However...

"!?"

Tohru and Akari's reactions were almost simultaneous.

Akari had been a little faster, which reminded Tohru all too well that his period of inactivity and lack of regular training really had taken its toll. At any rate, Tohru had pushed Chaika out of the way, and Akari had grabbed her from behind and pulled her backwards.

This sudden action had caused Chaika to drop the coins she was holding, which bounced as they hit the road.

There was a noise like very thin, very flat objects rushing past, and...

Ching!

With a sharp noise, one of those objects had pierced through a coin.

They were...

*Throwing needles!*

The petite Chaika had just about been sent flying by Tohru's push, so when Akari had caught her she had to take a step backward, and, continuing to go with that momentum, had leapt into the shadows of a nearby building, dragging Chaika along with her.

All this had happened within the span of a moment.

With his swords at the ready, Tohru kicked off the ground and also took cover, leaping into the shadow of a large garbage bin.

Then...

“...Vivi!”

A voice that sounded half-panicked, half-annoyed came from the road.

“Really? Now?”

“Gillette-sama, I know it’s unbecoming, but—”

It was the voice of a young man...and what sounded like a young girl.

As the darkness gradually parted, out came the figures of three people.

They were...

“They’re saboteurs, so they probably won’t want to talk it out normally.”

“...”

Tohru knitted his brows. He didn’t know who these people were, but they sure seemed to know that he was a saboteur. Of course, he doubted they had seen how Tohru and Akari had responded to the attack...they had known beforehand. That needle had unquestionably been thrown with pure killing intent. Tohru and Akari wouldn’t have reacted the way they did otherwise.

“Who in the hell...?”

For better or for worse, both Tohru and Akari were completely separated from each other.

What's more, Chaika's coffin was still lying right there in the road. Tohru saw from his position that Akari was trying to hold down Chaika, who was kicking and struggling. She seemed to be quite bothered by leaving the coffin there.

*...Akari.*

Tohru quickly communicated to Akari through sign language.

Saboteurs had many special techniques for being able to communicate and understand one another. From chaotic battlefields to silent enemy camps, they had to have a way to communicate effectively in any situation.

*Take Chaika and run. I'll meet you on the back hill. Tell Chaika that I'll grab her coffin.*

*Understood, Nii-sama. I'll take Chaika and run, and meet up with you on the back hill. You'll take care of the coffin.*

Akari nodded.

With that successfully communicated, Tohru took a smoke bomb out of his handbag. He would use it to create a diversion.

If he struck it on something, it would ignite and smoke would come pouring out. However, if it was thrown hard enough it would explode, emitting a flash of light and a bang. He held it in both hands and threw it in the direction of the approaching three.

*Bang!*

There was a dull explosion and a white flash that lit up the night, and the dark scenery temporarily dispersed. Anyone whose eyes had been adjusted to the darkness would be blinded all the same.

Carrying Chaika, Akari dashed off at lightning speed.

At the same time, Tohru kicked off and leapt toward the coffin that had been left behind.

He grabbed the coffin's handle, hoisted it up on his back, and kicked off the ground again. He didn't forget to throw his last smoke bomb against the ground to make doubly sure he was clear.

However...

“!?”

The smoke bomb didn't explode.

During that instant, someone, most likely one of the three, had skewered it with their sword. Since the bomb received an attack like that, it hadn't exploded.

In other words...

*It's him...!*

He glared at the man who had approached him in an instant.

*Quite an opponent.*

It was a blond-haired, blue eyed young man.

This was probably the guy that had raised such a bewildered tone of voice toward his comrade.

But he hadn't been affected by the light from the smoke bomb, nor the smoke that came from it. Furthermore, Tohru felt that he had closed the distance between them in a mere moment with his sword, and the attack had been sharp enough to pierce right through the smoke bomb as if there had been no impact at all.

Someone with half-baked techniques couldn't do that.

“You.”

The young man addressed the on-guard Tohru easily.

He didn't seem to have any intention of boasting about what he did. On the contrary, he seemed awfully reserved. That stab that he had executed just now was probably nothing but a normal attack to him.

“What is your relationship with that silver-haired girl that was here just now?”

“Huh?”

“Vivi, my subordinate here, told me that you are a saboteur. If by chance your relationship is purely employee and employer, it'd be best to not get involved with her any further. It's for your own good.”

“...”

Tohru's eyes narrowed.

This guy...was probably being completely genuine.

He didn't seem to be harboring any ill will or harmful intent toward Tohru. Those words hadn't had even a hint of provocation or insult in them. In fact, they seemed more like well-intentioned advice.

His stature and skill might have given the slight impression that he would look down on Tohru, yet he could feel that the man's expression was cool and calm. He had a face that looked confident about what he had to do, and what he had to do to achieve it.

But...

“You're the ones that raided Count Abarth's mansion, aren't you?”

“...”

“Don't get me wrong, I'm not chastising you for it. Though by no means will I praise you for it either. All I'm saying is that you should just entrust us with the coffin and get out of here. If you do so, we will not pursue you. The only things we need are the girl, and what's inside that coffin.”

“You mean the Gundo?”

“Did you not see what that girl took from Count Abarth's mansion?”

The young man tilted his head.

It seemed like he wasn't talking about Chaika's Gundo. After all, as far as Tohru could tell, that Gundo was a relic of the past. He had a feeling that they wanted something more than just to collect antiques.

So that meant...

“What are you talking about?”

Tohru played dumb.

He decided that here it would be better to let this good-intentioned intruder do the talking.

“What the hell is in there?”

“...”

The young man stayed silent.

So that meant he couldn't say? Tohru highly doubted that he didn't know.

“Gillette-sama.”

Suddenly, with a movement that felt like it had to be nearly weightless, a single girl stepped up to the young man's left.

She had a small build, so she only came up to the young man's shoulders. She looked to be about the same age as Chaika—in other words, she couldn't be any older than in her middle teens. She had an especially cute face.

However, her dark-grey eyes flashed with the sharpness of a blade.

Judging from how the conversation had gone up until now, this girl was probably the one who had thrown the needles with killing intent just a bit ago.

It would have been different if the needles had bounced off the coins, but they had pierced right through them...that was definitely an incredible display of skill.

“It's a wasted effort to try and talk with a saboteur. When they open their mouths it's all deception and trickery,” said the girl, who was probably Vivi.

Furthermore...

“I agree.”

The last one of the three, another young man, had stepped up to his right. This man had a low, rusty voice, wide shoulders, and was gigantic...about a head taller than a typical young man, in fact. Compared to the petite Vivi, this guy was like a boulder. Just at a glance he looked grim. He gave off the feeling that his footsteps would resound with every step he walked, and that just by walking he was disturbing the atmosphere around him. He had his arms crossed, and that gesture alone was wholly intimidating.

And what's more, on his back was a large sword.

It was...

*A comblade.*

The same type of weapon as Tohru's.

"The values a cavalier holds and the values a saboteur holds are almost completely opposite. Negotiations won't work on—"

"Give me a break," Tohru groaned. "That sounds real rich coming from a mercenary and an assassin."

"..."

"..."

Vivi and the giant only flinched a bit at that.

But most likely, Tohru had been right on the mark.

This "Gillette-sama" in the center was no doubt a cavalier.

This girl named Vivi on the left was an assassin.

And this guy on the right, whose name he didn't know, had to be a mercenary.

Clearly they were from many different walks of life, but what could have brought them all together?

"Nikolai, Vivi. Whoever he is, our main goal is the girl. He's just a hired hand who got roped into this without knowing the circumstances."

"..."

Tohru was put off by the words of this cavalier Gillette.

What the hell was that? It was like he was looking down on him.

Though he hadn't chosen his words to specifically make fun of him, either. Most likely, this guy was as genuine as he appeared to be. He probably didn't even realize he was looking down on Tohru. If he'd been brought up as a cavalier and a noble, looking down upon people who weren't nobility was probably just something that came naturally to him.

Moreover, there was that thing he had said, "a hired hand who got roped into this without knowing the circumstances."

Tohru stole a glance at the coins lying on the ground.

Indeed. Truthfully, the cavalier Gillette was correct. He was just someone whom she happened to pass by. Merely a hired hand. The job was over, which meant their relationship was, too. Chaika's behavior clearly indicated to Tohru that she wanted no more out of him.

But having that pointed out to him by a complete stranger...really ticked him off.

Sure, where battles were concerned, a saboteur would not hesitate to execute inhumane, cold-blooded tactics, even though they understood that what they were doing wasn't exactly moral. If necessary, they would take hostages. They would attack from behind under the cover of darkness. They would tell lies like it was nothing. They would trick their targets into walking into traps they set up beforehand. On the battlefield, cavaliers and soldiers played the lead roles, where they fought for just causes. There was no way they would resort to such cowardly and cruel tactics...those sorts of dirty deeds were all left up to the saboteurs.

But...

*That's why...*

He had wanted to accomplish something.

Back in that stormy world ravaged by war, he hadn't wanted to be a mere weakling who died being led around the nose. He felt like a life where one didn't have something to live and die for couldn't be called a "life" at all.

Back then, when he was young.

Back when she had died.

Tohru had been—

"You are a saboteur, right?"

"So what if I am?"

The cavalier's question was asked as if trying to confirm it, and Tohru responded with a scowl.

At any rate, this was a bad situation.

He was out of smoke bombs with which to escape, and furthermore the coffin he was carrying made it impossible to do so anyway. Perhaps he could just ditch the coffin and the severed hand inside—maybe that way he'd be able to make a run for it...but...

*That girl.*

Chaika.

Even though she wasn't good enough with words to articulate it.

Even though she had no one to depend on.

Despite all that, without any hesitation, she had still desired that hand. She had done the best she could, inching closer to her goal one step at a time. It was quite likely that she knew the danger she was putting herself in. In the first place, it was amazing that this girl who didn't even have the basics of combat down even managed to survive this long all by herself. Even though it was the post-war period, no, precisely because the world was in a post-war period, there was no shortage of night burglars and wannabe-soldier bandits. Perhaps the girl had faced many more hardships that he wasn't aware of.

Even so, he wasn't letting his feelings take over or anything.

But...if this was the thing she wanted so earnestly...

*Then I can't just leave it behind.*

He was aware how strange this way of thinking was for a saboteur such as himself. The reason his superiors never let him participate in his first battle probably wasn't because he lacked the ability. It was more likely that they had seen in him that side of his personality.

However...

"I hear that saboteurs are pragmatists, through and through. Whether you do or don't still call that girl your master, I don't think you're obligated to protect that thing. I am a cavalier, but it's precisely because I am one that I'd like to avoid meaningless conflict."

"Why, thank you very much," Tohru snapped back to the cavalier's calm words.

He was being made fun of.

Basically, Gillette was saying “you should just bend your knee to me since you can’t win. Looking at it logically, you should realize that handing over the coffin and leaving is the right thing to do here.”

*I still can’t use “Iron-Blood Transformation” for a while.*

Not even two hours had passed since the raid on the count’s mansion. If he didn’t wait at least half a day, using it would be risky in all sorts of ways.

*Can I even beat these three in this situation?*

It would be extremely difficult.

So what could he do?

“Now, hand over the coffin,” the cavalier Gillette said.

*Think, Tohru Acura. Think.*

While urging himself on, Tohru grasped the handles of the coffin tightly.

## Part 2

“No good! Cannot happen! Must turn back!”

“Shut up.” Akari continued to run with Chaika struggling under her arm.  
“Don’t make me go through the trouble of knocking you out.”

“Mu—”

Chaika stopped struggling and shouting. She probably realized that Akari was dead serious.

“Besides...”

Akari stopped running and let Chaika down.

After raising her voice to those three earlier, it was only the two of them moving around here. In this area there were a few shops lined up on the road, which meant it was common for it to be busy here during the daytime. At night, however, it was unsettlingly deserted, which made it easy to notice anyone’s presence, even if they were hiding.

This wasn’t a good situation to be in.

“Nii-sama said he would retrieve your precious coffin for you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, frowning. “Though...you really should be more worried about him.”

“Mui?”

“Those three might not all be using the same techniques, but if they’re all as skilled as the one throwing the needles, then it’ll be difficult for Nii-sama to escape from there. That’s not even taking into account the baggage he has...”

“Baggage?”

“Your coffin.” The crease in Akari’s brow deepened.

“...Understand.” Chaika nodded.

“Nii-sama...why on earth did you...?” she muttered. Though her expression

was as stagnant as ever, her behavior was that of someone who refused to accept the situation in front of her.

She turned her head away like she was trying to avoid looking at her troubles, but eventually she faced Chaika again and spoke.

“You stay here.”

“...”

“I’ll go back to help Nii-sama.”

“I, go with.”

“No. You’ll just be a burden.”

Akari said without hesitation.

“But—”

“Our job is already over. You’re no longer our client. Us continuing to travel with you up till now has all just been an extra service.”

“...”

Chaika looked like she had nothing to say to that.

It was understandable. Just a bit ago she herself had suggested the termination of their working relationship. What Akari was saying made sense.

But...

Chaika pointed to Akari.

“Akari, retrieve Tohru. Me, retrieve coffin.”

“Like I said, that won’t work...”

“Helping Tohru, impossible for me. For you, possible.”

“...” This time it was Akari’s turn to be speechless.

Basically, what Chaika was suggesting was that she would take back the coffin, whereas Akari would take back Tohru. Though they would be accompanying each other, their objectives would be different.

And of course, if she was captured or even killed on the way back from

retrieving her coffin, that would be Chaika's problem and not Akari's.

With that clear divide between the two, the saboteur Akari felt that it might not be impossible after all.

No, in fact, it was...

"We'll have to resort to some dirty tactics." Akari crossed her arms. "They would never expect us to go back there..."

Those three should have realized that Tohru had deliberately thrown that smoke bomb precisely to allow Chaika and Akari to make their escape.

But looking at it from the other side, that meant that they probably wouldn't be counting on Chaika and Akari to come back. So if they went back there and did something like circling and sneaking around the back, they might actually be able to pull this off.

"Understood. We'll do it."

"Grateful."

Chaika beamed at the nodding Akari.

\*

The confrontation ended with Tohru being apprehended quickly.

As soon as he was about to make a run for it with the coffin, the cavalier Gillette and the giant had brandished their swords on both sides of Tohru, crossing them. The sensation of the blade on the nape of his neck told him that it would be futile to do anything but stay put.

Not to mention...

"Your swords appear to be comblades," the giant said. He was easily keeping his massive sword in place with just one hand. "I'm also a comblade user." Comblade users were a pain to fight.

The blades communicated with their user through shared senses that would then be fed into energy, allowing the comblade to become a part of the user. Just by holding the sword, the highest equilibrium was achieved. In other words, in that moment the user and the sword became one living entity.

It was widely viewed as “the sword becoming part of the user”; however, you could also look at it from the reverse.

Namely, that “the user became part of the sword”.

Comblade users had no concept of “swinging a sword.”

That was because every one of their movements was a sword technique.

“Just give up. No matter how good you are with that comblade, you won’t be able to escape us three.”

“...”

Tohru glared at the giant for a bit, but then...

“Hmph.”

He lowered his shoulders and dropped his stance. Yet he did not let go of the coffin’s handles.

“I’ll ask you again,” Gillette began, his sword still thrust out.

Gillette’s sword didn’t seem to be a comblade, but that actually made it even more terrifying. It meant that he could use a regular sword at a comblade user’s level. He had heard that military-bred cavaliers learned how to grip a sword before they could even walk on their own two feet, and seeing this guy he certainly believed it.

“What is your connection to that girl?”

“...”

“Is she someone you know?”

“Right back at you. Is she someone *you* know?”

Tohru deliberately craned his neck to meet Gillette’s eyes.

The blade ever so slightly cut into his skin, and blood came trickling from his neck.

“That ‘someone’ you’re talking about is Chaika, right?”

“Of course,” Gillette nodded. “We are here for a just cause. We act because of a request from various nations across the world. Our actions are derived

from an understanding of who we're chasing after, and what that girl is chasing after."

"We're *way* different from you," Vivi chimed in. "We uphold justice."

"...An assassin upholding justice, huh?"

At Tohru's words, Vivi's glare became sharp, but she didn't say anything further.

"Ah, whatever. I get it already. In this situation, there's no way I can win. I'll comply and hand it over. Okay?"

Slowly, Tohru bent downward and set Chaika's coffin on the ground.

"Take your hands off it," the giant ordered.

"Are you sure you want me to do that?" Tohru said. "This coffin has been rigged with an explosive. If you were to force it open, it could blow up. Carelessness could cause all of you to get blown sky-high. Do you really want that?"

"..."

The cavalier Gillette and the giant exchanged glances.

For a brief moment, they seemed to be pondering the situation. But then...

"All right then," Gillette nodded. "Disarm whatever traps you have on it. Then, hand the object of our concern, the 'remains'."

"..."

Tohru thought hard.

So these guys knew that what Chaika wanted were those "remains". Which meant that someone had told them for what purpose she was collecting them, and whose remains they actually were. Of course, if they were also being employed by someone, then it was possible they didn't know the circumstances either—that would be the much more favorable outcome for Tohru.

Because that would mean they didn't have the whole picture.

With his back to everyone's stares, Tohru made a show of disarming the "trap" within the coffin. It went without saying that the stuff about the

explosion had been a complete fabrication. However, to have something like that set up wasn't an unusual tactic, especially for saboteurs. Tohru had already shown them that he used smoke bombs, so he thought explosives and such would probably be believable to them.

And so...

"This is what you guys are talking about, right?"

Tohru opened Chaika's coffin, undid the string tying the thing in question to the inside, and took it out.

Inside the clear cylinder was a severed hand.

Tohru displayed it to the three, as if telling them to take a good look at it. "Yes, that's it exactly," said Gillette, nodding enthusiastically.

After confirming that, Tohru broke into a wide grin.

"Oh. So this is it, huh?"

And then he threw it.

He threw the clear cylinder with the severed hand in the opposite direction, into the darkness of the night.

"!"

Instinctively, all three pairs of eyes went away from Tohru. Of course, neither of the men made any move to withdraw their swords, but their attention had been diverted while they were wielding them, and so they might as well have. On the backs of the gloves Tohru was wearing there was iron installed to repel blades. He knocked away the swords at his left and right and sunk downward, grabbed the coffin, and dashed away at lightning speed.

"W—"

"Forget him! Grab the remains!" shouted the cavalier, chasing after the hand that Tohru had thrown. Vivi quickly followed him.

Then...

"You're not going to go chase it?"

Tohru asked as he glared at the one person remaining, who went not in the

direction of the severed hand, but in the other direction...namely, towards Tohru.

“Saboteurs aren’t careless,” said the giant, who was directly behind him. “You probably just threw a fake.”

“I’m not that skilled.”

“At any rate...” the giant said, “I’m not as nice as Gillette-dono.”

In the next instant, with a force that rent the sky, the giant’s comblade flew at him.

Tohru sank to the ground and was just barely able to dodge, but some of his hair was ripped off with the attack and it scattered through the air.

“To kill an enemy, you just need to get rid of their means of attack. I know how you fight.”

“What sound logic.”

Seeing that the comblade was about to make another overhead chop, Tohru forcefully lifted up the coffin he was holding and swung.

“Nuoo!?”

The giant couldn’t have expected Tohru to use the coffin as a weapon. Of course, he had dodged the attack, but such an unnatural dodge did disrupt his stance slightly.

“—Agh!”

With a sharp cry, Tohru threw the coffin just like that.

After all, he had no hope of winning if he continued to lug around extra baggage.

It was certainly true that to kill an enemy, you just needed to limit their means. With the cavalier Gillette and assassin Vivi away, it was just the giant left. Tohru probably had a fighting chance.

He heard a clunk behind him, and he knew that the coffin must have hit the wall or something. But he didn’t care about that...he unsheathed both swords and confronted the giant ahead of him.

“Hm.” A bold smile crossed the giant’s face. “Not bad for a brat.”

“Oh, really?”

Tohru licked his lips.

In the next instant, the two of them moved almost simultaneously.

“Hnn!”

The giant swung first.

Tohru just barely defended by dodging it.

No matter how good the giant was with his sword, no matter how much arm strength he possessed, it didn’t change how heavy his sword actually was. And in addition to it being heavy, it was also rather long and wide, which made it especially hard to swing around.

So his trajectory was limited to begin with.

As long as all of his attacks were direct swings, then even without “Iron-Blood Transformation” Tohru would be able to dodge them easily.

The blade uselessly sailed over Tohru’s head.

Then...

“Huh!?”

The blade cut deeply into the wall of a nearby building with a dull sound.

*It stuck in there!*

Once he saw that, he was convinced. After something like that, the sword wouldn’t be able to be pulled out right away. The giant’s crude destructive power had turned against him. If it had been a weaker attack the sword would have just bounced off the wall.

Taking a single step forward, Tohru sent a double-bladed attack towards the giant’s chest. The pointed end of the right comblade was heading right for a vital spot. This would surely be the killing blow.

But...

“!?”

The attack didn't pierce his flank. Instead, it only stabbed the air.

It was hard to believe that someone of the giant's stature could have moved in such a way to actually dodge it, especially as quickly as he did.

He would have had to pull a frighteningly unnatural stance in the air.

It was impossible. Keeping in mind the giant's position and the stance he was in, Tohru determined that there was no way he could have avoided his attack. No matter how flexible he was, that kind of movement was beyond the limits of what the human body could do. It was impossible for a human in a normal stance to turn his head all the way around, and in the first place he wouldn't be able to jump immediately after that massive swing.

And yet...

"Haha!"

With a sharp laugh, the giant sent the heel of his boot down at Tohru from up above with all the force of a hammer.

For Tohru, whose posture was already compromised from dodging that last attack, it was impossible to avoid. He immediately used his left sword to block the heel, but that didn't nullify the impact. The sword went flying from his hand and stuck into the wall of a nearby building.

"...!"

Rather than stubbornly trying to stand back up, Tohru rolled away. He had to get some distance between him and the giant.

"...Wait, you didn't..."

"I did." The giant gave him a big grin.

The giant's comblade was still stuck in the wall.

No, it wasn't that it was stuck in the wall. The giant had *made* it get stuck in the wall.

Tohru could tell just by looking at it that that huge comblade was sturdy. Sturdy enough that it wouldn't break even if the giant put his whole weight on it. In other words, he had stuck his sword into the wall to fix it in place, so that

he could use it as leverage to launch himself into the air.

It wasn't a technique a cavalier or a swordsman would use.

It didn't fit the orthodox style of either of them.

This blunt way of using anything and everything in the area in combat was more in line with a mercenary...much closer in nature to a saboteur technique Tohru or Akari would use. It was a method of combat that any textbook cavalier would ridicule, calling it "cowardly and unfair" or "heresy."

However...

"Surely you, a saboteur, aren't going to call that unfair?" the giant laughed as he pulled his sword out from the wall.

"I won't," Tohru said.

Unfairness was fine. Foul play was fine.

A saboteur's pride was to bring victory to their client regardless of the methods used. In battle, there was no such thing as right or wrong.

"Well, then..."

Bam! The giant rushed towards Tohru, emitting a ground-rending sound as he kicked off.

It was a direct, sudden attack from the front.

This attack would have the force of his running speed combined with the giant's muscle strength and the mass of his sword, not to mention the sheer force of his running speed made it difficult to judge the distance between them. On top of that, every fiber of his being was concentrated on this assault, and the amount of zeal he was pouring into it made it nothing less than deadly.

Simple though the trajectory might be, a sideways sweep from the front meant that it was impossible to dodge left, right, or down. And if he jumped without thinking, he would leave himself completely open.

Put simply, this attack was one to be feared.

However...

"Surely you aren't going to say that *this* is unfair!" Tohru shouted as he leapt

into the air while spinning around. The giant's slash went right under him.

Of course, if evading left, right, or down wasn't an option, then obviously the only choice was up.

"Hah!"

Letting out a short cry, Tohru brought his sword down on the giant's head. It was a technique that could split boulders in half, plus the fact that he had spun around his entire body meant that even more acceleration force would be applied, doubling the power of his attack.

But...

"Foolish!" the giant yelled.

Sure, Tohru had avoided the sideways sweep. But that was all he had done. He had left himself in the air with nowhere to go, and so the giant, attacking from a different angle, released a vertical sweep upward. Regardless of the circumstances the giant's straight swipe up was a shorter motion, and so it reached Tohru first.

Or at least, it should have.

"!?"

The giant crumpled.

And it was in that moment that he probably finally realized what had happened.

A thin black string was tangled around his legs. The string led to the pommel of a sword—Tohru's sword which had been knocked away earlier. The reason Tohru had deliberately spun in the air as he jumped was not to accelerate his attack, but to pull the string wound along the ground tight around the giant.

"Got you!"

Tohru released an attack from overhead meant to knock down his opponent.

But for some reason, the giant raised his own left arm to block it.

...There was the unnatural sound of steel hitting against something.

Tohru's attack hadn't severed his arm; on the contrary it had been stopped at

his thick muscles. The giant was probably wearing chain mail on the inside of his clothing. It was a common thing on the battlefield; it wasn't like it was unfair.

"Tch...!"

Instead of following up any further, Tohru sent a kick at his chest to get some distance.

At the same time, he pulled in the rope, and the sword stuck in the wall came back to him.

However...

"Ungh...ugh..."

The giant groaned as his left arm hung down loosely.

He was bleeding...probably because his muscles had been cut so deeply, he didn't have any strength left in his arms. Both arms were stained red, and bright red blood was dripping from his fingers.

"Now then," Tohru said, crossing his swords in a scissor-like shape. "You said that to kill an enemy you needed to get rid of their means, right?"

It was probably impossible for the giant to swing that huge comblade efficiently with only one arm.

Not to mention the quantity of blood he was losing—if Tohru didn't give him an opportunity to stop the bleeding, even if he decided to spare him it was Tohru's win.

"..."

The giant frowned, but he unconcernedly picked up his sword and assumed his stance.

"You're still going to fight?"

"Of course. That's the pride of a mercenary. Something a saboteur would know nothing of."

"..."

With a sigh, Tohru lowered his blades.

And in the next moment...

“!?”

There was a dull sound, and then the giant's head wobbled.

He sunk down and hit the ground with an earth-shaking crash. Behind him were...

“Are you hurt, Nii-sama?”

“Tohru, came to rescue.”

It was Akari with her hammer in hand, with Chaika beside her.

## Part 3

Alberic Gillette and Vivi were easily able to secure the severed hand. They figured it would be somewhat difficult to find since it was night, but they were able to spot it unexpectedly well. The candle street lamps placed along the road at fixed intervals gave off a dim glow, and the clear container gleamed in the light.

“Do you think this is it?” Vivi stared at the severed hand with great interest.

“Probably, although I can’t tell for sure. We’re going to have to consult with Mattheus or Zita,” Alberic said. He took a cloth out of his bag, covered the hand with it and then tied it to the side of his waist not occupied by his sword.

“Come to think of it, where’s Nikolay?”

“It looks like he stayed behind to take care of that saboteur,” Vivi said.

“Take care of’, huh...”

Alberic frowned.

“Gillette-sama. Even though that guy looked young, don’t forget he’s a saboteur. He’s definitely capable of throwing out a fake to deceive us.”

“That’s definitely a possibility,” Alberic said with a sigh.

Alberic had made it a point to try to not involve any unrelated people in this matter. That boy might have been a saboteur or whatever, but it seemed to him like he was merely being employed by someone and thus didn’t have the whole picture.

“Let’s go back for now. If all goes well, I’ll be able to stop Nikolay.”

“Gillette-sama...” Now it was Vivi’s turn to sigh. The *bona fide* assassin looked put out with Alberic’s amiability.

But the truth was that neither one of them had even an inkling of doubt that Nikolay would win. This was Nikolay of the comblade, whose strength had no equal. With his comblade he specialized in mercenary sword skills utilizing his entire body, and executed them with the utmost precision. Against him, even

Alberic wasn't confident he'd be able to win.

And so...

"...Huh?"

They had returned to the place where the saboteur boy had been captured a bit ago.

"Nikolay!?" Alberic shouted, shocked. Vivi ever so slightly stood at the ready.

Their strong comrade, who they thought could never possibly lose to anyone, was lying on the ground. His legs were tied together, and the saboteur boy was sitting on top of him.

"You—you defeated Nikolay?"

"Well, more or less." The saboteur boy looked largely unconcerned. "For your information, he's still alive."

"..." Alberic's eyebrows went up.

Saboteurs weren't choosy about their methods to achieve victory. Of course, that meant that murder was definitely within their vocabulary. The saboteur boy had defeated Nikolay, so of course he could snuff out his life just like that.

Which meant...

"It's this you want."

Alberic undid the tie attaching the severed hand to his waist and held the hand out.

"You got it. Sorry to have you go through the trouble of finding it and bringing it back to me," the saboteur boy said. He continued to scowl as he said it, so no doubt it was intended to be sarcasm. "If you consider that thing to be more important than the life of your comrade over here, then by all means, keep it, and I'll kill this guy. It might be a pain, but to be completely honest, if it came right down to it it'd be easier than twisting a baby's neck."

"..."

Alberic heard Vivi emit a brief moan.

But this boy was—

"You don't understand," Alberic said, choosing his words carefully.

"What do you mean by that?"

"About that girl. The girl who hired you. Right now, you don't even know her name, do you?"

"..." The saboteur's eyes narrowed as he looked at each of them.

"I don't know how much that girl told you, but let's stop with the ridiculous facade. Nothing good can come from working with that girl. Do you want to make an enemy of the entire world?"

"You say that, but you're just spouting vague, abstract bullshit. How about coming right out and saying it?"

"..."

"..."

Alberic and Vivi looked at each other. This saboteur boy really had no idea.

This was confidential information of the highest degree...however.

"The Gaz Empire," Alberic said. "This severed hand belongs to the one and only Emperor Gaz. 'The Demon King', the 'Taboo Emperor', he has many names, but he was the strongest wizard of them all. Arthur Gaz."

"..."

Atop the saboteur's scowling face, his eyebrows went up.

He probably didn't believe him.

Arthur Gaz was an incredibly powerful man. None of the legends, tales, or achievements attributed to that man were any exaggeration. There were many who even said he was inhuman. At any rate, his was an existence so incredibly large that to the average person, he would seem unreal.

But...

"And that silver-haired girl you're working for is..."

As he continued, Alberic tried to get a feel for the boy's reaction.

"Chaika Gaz—the Emperor Gaz's daughter."

\*

Arthur Gaz.

The man was called many things: “Taboo Emperor”, “Demon King”, “Immortal King”, “monster”, “Great Sage”, “Ultra Emperor”, “Lunatic of War”...the list went on.

They were all correct ways to describe him, but at the same time they were all wrong. That was because summing up such a large and complex existence in several words was impossible. He was the likes of which the continent of Verbiest had never seen before throughout its entire history, and to tell the truth, it could even be said that based on his astoundingly long life and overwhelming strength, to describe the man as an “individual” was wrong; he was simply “the king of the Gaz Empire.”

During his iron-fisted rule over the northern countries he invented a great number of magical arts and techniques as a great sage, and all throughout the long, constant maelstrom of the warring period, he was a tactician who continued to lead the major powers of the continent around by the nose.

In particular...there was no question that Arthur Gaz was the one to lay the groundwork for the existence of magic, and taking into account the fact that magic was prevalent in many fields, there were many scholars and sages who said that without the Gaz Empire, civilization would be at least a hundred years behind. They also said that the Empire would be what guided humanity forward.

But on the other hand, there were no records whatsoever of Arthur Gaz before he built the Gaz Empire...he was a complete enigma. So there were also those who said that the whole Gaz Empire was just one big swindle.

At any rate, that was just how much influence Emperor Gaz had on the continent of Verbiest, and the records alone show that for almost three hundred years the man continued to have a profound influence on the world.

However...with the advent of freely accessible magic rituals, the immortal “Demon King” who had ruled over the Gaz Empire for nearly three hundred years was rumored to not be so immortal after all.

And during the battle at the Empire's imperial capital, Arthur Gaz was killed. His men soon followed, and it brought an end to the chaos in Verbist at last.

In other words, Arthur Gaz was the very symbol of the warring period itself. It goes without saying that his influence is still widespread today.

And so...

\*

"The Demon King's...daughter?" Tohru raised his eyebrows.

This was not what he had expected to hear at all.

It had definitely caught him off guard. He feared that he actually let the surprise show on his face, which was an incredibly poor way for a saboteur to conduct himself. The cavalier Gillette nodded at Tohru's reaction and continued.

"That's right. And five years ago, during the battle at the imperial capital where Arthur Gaz himself was killed, his daughter was the only one to survive."

"...Wait, the only one?"

Any way you looked at her, Chaika had to be in her mid-teens, which meant that during that battle five years ago she would have been about ten. It was hard to imagine a girl of that age being able to escape a scene like the death of the monster Gaz all by herself. But if she had the help of her retainers or something, then why weren't they by her side now?

Perhaps they had died after using up all their strength.

Perhaps they had abandoned Chaika and ran away.

Or perhaps...

*'Impossible! You're supposed to be dead!'*

Come to think of it, the count had said something like that upon seeing her, which meant that it was probably due to some miraculous coincidence that she was still alive.

"The exact circumstances elude us as well," the cavalier said. "But regardless, we cannot simply let this girl do as she pleases."

"Why not?" Tohru asked.

As far as he could tell, Chaika was nothing more than a dim-witted girl who was able to use a sparse bit of magic. She definitely didn't seem like the kind of presence that would warrant the likes of a cavalier, mercenary and assassin to track her down as a group.

But apparently, there was more to her than Tohru thought.

"The emperor Gaz still has many loyal to him, even now. The alliance formed to storm the Gaz Empire's capital was nothing short of a miracle to begin with."

Technically speaking, the powers of the world being able to form a temporary alliance against the Gaz Empire was due to many things lining up at the right time, which had led to the attack on the capital. Even if the Gaz Empire was somehow resurrected, that alliance would probably never happen again. That was what the cavalier Gillette said, anyway.

"At any rate, the Taboo Emperor's influence is still widespread, even after his death. There are even people that want his daughter, Chaika Gaz, to take over and restore the Gaz Empire."

"..."

"At the same time," Gillette said, turning his gaze to the clear cylinder in his hand, "it is doubtless that the remains of this monster said to have lived three hundred, no, even five hundred years, came to possess incredibly potent fuel for magic. As a matter of fact, the quantity of magic contained within is immeasurable. Combine that kind of magic with a Gundo and you have a weapon of absolutely no equal."

The driving force behind magic, in other words 'magical power,' came from a person's thoughts. The corpses of intelligent lifeforms housed the residual thoughts accumulated throughout their lives. As long as the appropriate steps were followed, it was possible to extract these thoughts and turn them into magical power. Many magic institutions would use methods like fossilization or covering the corpse with grey wax to give the thoughts physical form. This was a commonplace way to extract magical power, and metaphorically speaking, using a wizard's thoughts as an ember would create quite the explosion.

In many cases, the fossils of Feyra were used—however, through preservation techniques it was also possible to use human body parts.

Like, for instance, that severed hand.

“...I see now.”

That Gundo back at the count’s mansion had been large enough to cover the entire range of the building because it was being powered by the severed hand of the powerful wizard, the “Taboo Emperor,” not because the Gundo itself was so large.

That meant that the remains of Arthur Gaz had been divided, and most likely scattered all over the place. What kind of magical weapon could be created if all the parts were to be brought back together...no, what would happen if those that wished for the revival of the Gaz Empire were to get their hands on it? No doubt, that was what had the people behind the cavalier Gillette so scared.

“You understand now, don’t you?” Gillette said. Tohru could sense the slightest hint of impatience in his voice. “Chaika Gaz is a calamity waiting to happen—an existence that will jeopardize the peace we’ve attained at last, and will throw us back into chaos once more. We absolutely cannot, under any circumstances, let that girl collect her dead father’s remains!”

\*

“Chaika Gaz is a calamity waiting to happen—an existence that will jeopardize the peace we’ve attained at last, and will throw us back into chaos once more. We absolutely cannot, under any circumstances, let that girl collect her dead father’s remains!”

The cavalier’s raised voice reached Akari’s ears, who was hiding with Chaika a bit further away.

“...”

Devoid of expression, Akari turned and looked at Chaika.

The daughter of the “Taboo Emperor” bit her lip and hung her head slightly.

“Is what he’s saying true?”

“...”

Chaika didn't respond.

But her fingers around her Gundo's grip, the Gundo that she had set up on the roof of this house in order to protect Tohru, had turned a sickening shade of white.

That basically confirmed it.

"The daughter of the "Demon King"..."

"I—"

That was all Chaika uttered.

Her speech was not in the main language of the continent, but in Laike, the language used up north where the Gaz Empire had been.

"I just...all I want to do is...gather the remains of my father...and give him a proper burial...that's all...just that...it's something I have to do..."

"..."

Akari was silent.

But she couldn't imagine that Chaika was affiliated with any survivors or supporters of the Gaz Empire. There wouldn't have been any reason to hire her and Tohru otherwise.

Akari was an orphan. In the Acura village, there were quite a few who had never known their family. For them it was traditional to pick up orphans, raising them to be saboteurs.

So Akari couldn't understand how Chaika felt. She could only imagine.

However...

"...Nii-sama."

How did Tohru feel about this?

Narrowing her eyes, Akari waited for her honorable brother's response.

\*

"That's fine with me."

Tohru muttered it. But even so, it seemed like Gillette and Vivi behind him

were both able to hear. Both of them looked puzzled.

“Throwing the world back into chaos? Sounds good.”

Tohru smiled, showing his teeth.

Gillette’s eyes went wide, and he groaned. Vivi glared at Tohru like she was looking at a despicable lowlife.

Tohru didn’t care, and continued on. He was a saboteur and a jobless deadbeat, so he was used to abuse and scorn.

“Chaos? Bring it on. With that, we can go back to the warring period once more.”

“You...!” Gillette’s expression warped, like he had just seen a monster belt out an incomprehensible chant.

“I’m a saboteur. This peaceful world can just go to hell! Not being able to do anything, not able to leave anything behind, just dying pointlessly and not being able to change anything—I don’t need any of that!”

The memories of his youth passed through the back of his mind.

Jasmine, whose life had ended while she was holding her child.

He had wanted to change the world.

He had wanted to etch his own existence into it.

Not just be born to simply die, but for there to be a meaning to why he was here. That was what he wanted. A reason for his birth, and a reason for his death. That was what he wished for with every fiber of his being.

And so...

“Then...you wish for chaos!?”

“You’re damn right I do!” Tohru flashed a vehement smile.

Though to be honest, that wasn’t the whole reason. There was something else.

*So that’s her purpose for living...*

Chaika. The daughter of the “Taboo Emperor.”

The lonely princess carrying around her coffin...running around trying to collect her father's remains.

All by herself, in the center of this despairing world, with everyone her enemy.

But even so, she continued to move, heading straight for her goal.

No matter how fruitless it was, the girl never wavered from her path...to her, it was the meaning of her life.

And that was...

*I want to grant her wish.*

Tohru thought from the bottom of his heart.

She was different from him. Even if the world changed, no, precisely *because* the world changed, she had a will that would not bend.

And for Tohru, that was something incredibly dazzling to witness.

Therefore—

“Chaika!”

As he shouted her name, he jumped.



As he charged at them with incredible force, he closed his eyes.

“!?”

The cavalier and the assassin went on guard.

Both were skilled in their respective fields. There was no way that Tohru as he was now could win against them, even rushing straight at them.

But...

*Shoom!*

An intense light ripped through the air between Gillette and Tohru.

It was magic that Chaika had prepared beforehand.

“The Blinder.” A spell that used luminescent illusion magic to an extreme degree.

Naturally, anyone exposed to this defenseless would be blinded within seconds.

On top of that, moving in the cover of the night was a saboteur’s specialty. Moving silently without a trace in the darkness, Tohru had techniques available to him that did not require being able to see, using reflexive sounds and going with the flow of the atmosphere instead.

Of course, though his opponents were blinded they wasted no time in attacking.

“Ugh!?”

Gillette unsheathed his sword and swung, but the light of Chaika’s magic had already removed his ability to see, and so his movements were all over the place. It was the same for Vivi. As an assassin, she probably had some of the same techniques for moving around in the dark that Tohru had, but since the light had come without any warning, she hadn’t had any way of shielding her eyes.

Even so, both of their attacks were still dangerous.

Gillette’s sword made a wide circle and Vivi’s needles went flying towards him.

But, since their sight had been compromised, both their techniques were a far cry from being flawless. Tohru raised his comblades and blocked both attacks in an instant.

“Ku...!?” Gillette groaned.

Tohru hurled himself at him.

“I’ll be taking that back.”

Tohru forcefully snatched the severed hand out of Gillette’s grasp.

“W-Wait!?” Gillette looked left and right as he shouted, confused. Vivi reflexively prepared another needle—but she didn’t throw it. She was probably afraid that without being able to see she might accidentally hit her comrade.

“Wait, you—”

Gillette continued to shout, but Tohru, looking straight ahead, was already behind them, running.

\*

Right now, he was carrying almost nothing with him.

He had his favored weapon and his tools. Other than that, he had the clothes he was wearing, and just a little bit of money. It was no exaggeration that everything could be put in a bag and carried, save for Chaika’s coffin.

“Akari?”

“I’m all done packing on my end.”

Akari had packed her things in much the same way.

His non-blood-related sister nodded at him, and Tohru once again checked just to make sure.

“I’m going to ask this just in case, but you *do* know you don’t necessarily need to come with me, right?”

“What a ridiculous question, Nii-sama.” Akari shook her head. “I will go wherever you go.”

“...Akari...”

“Nii-sama ,” Akari said quietly, with a carefully stoic face, “if you go and die in some unfamiliar place, how else am I going to be able to stuff you?”

“Then I hope I die in a grand explosion,” Tohru groaned. He gave a sigh, and left the house.

Dawn had not broken yet, so it was still quite a dark morning. The girl with a coffin on her back stepped out into the chilly air, all by herself.

“Well then, shall we go?”

“Mu?”

Chaika turned around, bewildered.

“Tohru. Akari. Why?”

“Well...I got my face seen by the count here.” Tohru shrugged his shoulders. “So that means I can’t be in this town anymore.”

Not only had he snuck into the count’s mansion, he had actually fought him. And in the end, he had even squared off against a group of people that had received a special task from the major powers of the world. It wasn’t impossible to stay in Del Solant after all that, he supposed, but he had no reason to.

“So I figured I would join you on this journey, and help you out with your ‘work.’ That’s reasonable, right?”

He didn’t have anywhere else to go anyway, so he didn’t mind going in the same direction as Chaika.

Also, it seemed like she was somewhat loaded...he also had the selfish ulterior motive of “if he went with her, at the very least he wouldn’t have to worry about going hungry.”

And also—

“But. I.” Chaika hung her head.

As he thought, she was still worried about her lineage.

“Taboo Emperor, daugh—”

“I told you already,” Tohru said in a chiding tone. “War is fine with me.”

“...”

“If we go with you, the world will probably change. I don’t want this worthless peace to keep up, I want something that will change the whole world. That’s what I wish for.”

It was a lot better than dying pointlessly.

Even if he was called a demon or continuously insulted.

He wanted to carve some kind of proof that he lived into the world—

“Chaika.”

He turned to the silver-haired girl and extended his hand.

“I’m going to move forward. What about you?”

“...”

Chaika looked at Tohru. Then she looked at Akari.

“Hm.” Akari nodded.

And then—

“Yes!”

Smiling brightly, she took Tohru’s hand.

The daughter of the “Taboo Emperor”—Chaika Gaz.

The saboteur siblings, Tohru and Akari Acura.

That day, they left Del Solant at the break of dawn.

On their journey to plunge the world once again into chaos.

# Afterword

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## Afterword

Hello, I'm the light novel author Ichiro Sakaki.

I'm the writer of this new work, "Hitsugi no Chaika."

It's a fantasy novel about swords and magic...I guess.

If I were to say "this particular work was completed with the help of many others," that would imply that I write all my other books completely by myself from beginning to end, and that is simply not the case. When I write, there is no question that my usual team of lead editor, illustrator, proofreader, and designer give me assistance in various ways.

However, when it came to the actual content and planning of this story, I also shamelessly adopted many ideas and suggestions given to me by various people. That is to say, I feel like this work is probably a different breed from my other works I've written up till now. Though I'm probably the only one on the staff who feels that way (lol).

To begin with, take the initial meeting I had with my lead editor:

Sakaki: "So what are we going to do about this new work?"

Lead Editor-san (hereafter referred to as Editor): "I'm thinking an orthodox fantasy with swords and magic."

Sakaki: "I see. Then how about this?"

Editor: "If it wouldn't be too much trouble...I need you to redo this part."

Sakaki: "Wait, if I rewrite that, this work will lose what makes it stand out..."

Editor: "We don't need any strange twists."

Sakaki: "Damn...how about this, then?"

Editor: "If it wouldn't be too much trouble...I need you to redo this part."

Sakaki: "Wait, if I rewrite that, this work will lose what makes it stand out..."

Editor: "We don't need any strange twists."

Sakaki: "Damn...how about this?"

Editor: "If it wouldn't be..." (and so on)

Sakaki: "Wait, if I rewrite that..." (and so on)

This exchange would go on for a while.

Sakaki: "Then, what should I write!?"

Editor: "Since it's a swords-and-magic fantasy setting, there should be a protagonist with a family or a lover to protect! And then they have to go on a journey to defeat some giant evil! Right!?"

Sakaki: "Oh, I see. You just want me to write a boring, cliche-riddled story, huh?"

Editor: "Oh, is that what you think? Then fine, write whatever you want!"

Sakaki: "I'll make the heroine's name 'Pacifica'! Then I can knock out ten volumes in one night!" (1)

Editor: "Like I'll let you do that!"

Sakaki: "Then, what should I..." (and so on)

Well, it was something to that effect.

At any rate, while we were quarreling we ended up getting at least some details nailed down fairly quickly, like "the main party consists of two girls and one guy" and "they're going to go on a journey", and that made me think that going back to the basics was actually a pretty good thing. Conversely, however, I felt like I was unable to escape the influence of other works in the genre, and so there were quite a few times where I was confused on how to proceed. On one hand, I was aware that I had to go back to the basics, but on the other hand, I was equally aware that I had to write something new, and I was torn between them, as if both thoughts were grabbing my legs and pulling in opposite directions.

The result was that every day that I would come in with more detailed

content, my lead editor would continue to deliver his rejections.

Rejections like “the heroine’s name isn’t cute enough.”

Well, on that front, due to certain unavoidable circumstances I knew that I wanted the heroine to have a Russian name, but the truth is, the majority of cute-sounding Russian names had already been taken, like “Anya” or “Kudryavka.” I guess I could have gone ahead and used them anyway, but I think that using a name like “Kudryavka” would already call up a defined image in everyone’s heads. (2)

And so, overwhelmed with worry, I ended up turning to two Russian experts, Tominaga Hiroshi and Hayami Rasenjin, and asked them what some good Russian names were.

As for the title of the book, that too was rejected countless times, and so when I went around asking all my personal acquaintances for assistance with tears in my eyes, it was my buddy Amagi Shuunsuke who suggested that I take the kanji for “coffin” and “princess” and have them read together as “hitsugi”, which I took to immediately.

Well, anyway, it’s thanks to all their warm support (it’s important how you say things, you know) that this volume was able to be completed. And it wasn’t like I slacked off or anything. Really!

Though I’ve created many settings up to this point, if you all would continue to read my stories, I would be very grateful.

This time the planning was on a completely different level than normal, to the point where even I ended up not being able to read it all. Of course I suppose some sort of comeback like “even normally you still can’t read!” is inevitable.

If you thought that this book was interesting in all sorts of ways, enough that you want to continue reading, I would be overjoyed.

And also, because the illustrator NamanikuATK’s illustrations here and there were so spectacular (even the initial early ones that didn’t make it in the book), I’m of the opinion that there should be a mini artbook included with the story (lol).

Well then.

I pray that we will see each other again in the next volume.

Ichiro Sakaki, November 13, 2010

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. This is referring to one of Sakaki's previous works, *Scrapped Princess*. In it, the main heroine's name is Pacifica. The series ran for ten volumes.
2. Here he is referencing Kudryavka Noumi of *Little Busters!* fame. When you think Kudryavka, most otaku would think of her.

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